

LOVER'S CRY

Lover's Cry

DAKOTA FRANDSEN

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Contents

1	Olivia	1
2	Dakota	15
3	“Dakota is The One”	35
4	Ghosts to Hunt	71
5	Back to School	113
6	Immortals?	139
7	The Exorcism	177

Chapter 1

Olivia

It seems like forever since the last time anyone was able to enjoy some peace and quiet around here. The war is still raging on all over the planet, but the army I served with managed to push back the invaders far enough away from here that people can rebuild their lives. I should know, considering in the time that has passed I married the man who saved my life several times and we even had a beautiful ten-month-old daughter together.

For those of you who read my husband's books, you might already have an idea about what I am talking about. But the truth is, my husband didn't cover everything that happened. In fact, I am pretty sure that many of you are a bit confused about how I am even able to tell my story, considering how things ended last time you heard about me. Hopefully, for those of you who have paid attention, I will be able to sort through the chaos as many of us are still trying to do. Because

2 ~ DAKOTA FRANDSEN

the truth is, there are many things that my husband didn't mention in his book that make the truth about the Paranormal Raider Force and the war much darker than anyone ever realized. So within these pages, I hope to continue the trend, started by my husband, and reveal some secrets of my own that I kept away from the people I was closest to; so here goes.

For those of you who haven't figured it out yet, my name is Shandra Frandsen, even though for the majority (if not all) of this story I had yet to be married and was still hanging on to my maiden name of Ford. My husband, Dakota Frandsen, was the founder and leader of a paranormal investigation team known as the Paranormal Raider Force. I honestly thought that I would never be a part of the things that Dakota showed me in the eight years we have been together. Dakota came to me in a time I needed an escape from a dangerous home, one that almost killed me on various occasions.

My husband may have already shed some light on our time together, but he never really knew all of the details about what happened. I didn't want to keep these secrets from him, or from anyone for that matter, I was just too afraid. There was so much I could tell about the times my head would be smashed against the kitchen cabinet or my nose would be busted open because I was stupid and tried to block my stepfather's punches. But I am getting ahead of myself.

My story begins when I was about nine years old when I was just in the third grade. I had just come

home from school when I finally heard the news. News that I never wanted to hear. I remember that I was sitting at my desk doing homework when I heard a knock at the front door. I listened as my mom, Ramona, answered the door. It wasn't long before I could tell I was needed after I heard her start crying. We lived in a two story house at the time in a quiet suburban neighborhood. The public library and the city park were right across the street, so any noise other than the sounds of children at play was unusual.

Hearing my mom cry like she did immediately informed me something was wrong. So I hurried downstairs to find out what was wrong. As my bare feet brushed against the carpet floor, I almost felt tiny hands hold me in place when I made it halfway through the staircase. I looked to the front door to find my mom talking with two guys dressed in Army Ceremonial attire. Her hands held a small triangle flag against her chest as she sank to her knees. The two guys tilted their hats in my direction and walked away as my mom continued to cry. I had no clue what was happening, but I wish I never asked. "Mom," I said, "What is wrong?" She started to wipe her eyes as she gently turned her head to the side in order to hear me better. "Shandra, honey, can you come here for a second?" she asked.

As I walked down the stairs, I couldn't help but ask, "Am I in trouble?" My mom quietly laughed. "No, sweetie. Just please come here for a minute," she an-

swered. The front door stood wide open as I walked up behind my mom. I saw the army guys get into a black luxury sedan when I was finally right next to my mom so she could deliver the news.

"Hey," she whispered, "Remember what I told you could happen to you dad when he left?"

"Yeah," I answered. "Well, unfortunately, your dad won't be coming home."

I felt my heart hit the floor. I remember praying every night by the picture of my dad and I, on his old fishing boat, that stood on the nightstand by my bed just to see my dad again. I loved it when I could sneak onto the computer to talk with him online at three o'clock in the morning, but I wanted to see him in person again.

"Why isn't he coming home? Did he get hurt?" I asked my mom.

"He did get hurt, very badly. Shandra, your dad has passed away," my mom answered.

"What?"

"Daddy has died, sweetie."

My mom tried to hold back her crying long enough for her to be able to tell me what happened, but right as she confirmed what she said she lost it. I couldn't help but scream as loud as I could when my eyes started to water up. I just heard that my dad had died while he was away in Iraq. I never knew much about what he did over there, other than he monitored radars for potential air threats.

In my childish mind, I thought that he was one of the safest people over there. My mind couldn't wrap itself the horrors of what was happening, or around the horrible things that were about to happen. When I first heard the news about my father, my eyes closed themselves off from the world. When they opened, I found my mom squeezing my body. Just outside the house both of the Army guys were sitting in their car with their windows down, watching. One of them had an evil smirk on his face. I always had a bad feeling whenever I saw him, and it wasn't long before I found out why.

It took about a month in order to make the arrangements for my father's funeral. The official reports of the incident stated that his body was too damaged to be returned home so the military sent his belongings in a large box along with a condolence letter signed by everyone in his unit. In the place of his body, the casket would be lined with various items that all who attended knew he loved. Some people tossed in a few DVD copies of old western movies. A couple people added CD and cassette copies of old rock bands. My mom threw in a few letters she and my dad wrote to each other when they first started dating. Right on top of the pile, I set down a song that I was writing for him, for the day he came home, on the piano.

My mom taught me how to play when I was really little, and I became so in love with the sound that I nearly played every night. Sometimes I would play

something for my dad while we video chatted, and every time I did he swore that I would become a great musician. After he died, I hardly ever played. It wasn't because I didn't want to play anymore, it was because I was afraid of the man who came into my life after the funeral. The fear and anger I felt towards him ruined the melody of the keys as my hands would move on their own to play. Greg Roland, the man my mom started dating shortly after my dad's funeral. He served in the same unit and was one of the men that showed up to deliver the news. I noticed that he and my mom became close very quickly.

At first, he seemed like a nice guy, in fact, I even became comfortable enough with him to call him my dad. But shortly after he and my mom got married, things became very violent very quickly. What started as an argument a week became a twenty-four-hour death match. Greg used to throw anything in his sight at my mom, from tables to knives. My piano was one of the first things broken beyond repair because of his rampages. Soon my mom wasn't enough of a punching bag for him, and he started coming after me.

When he thought that I lied about my homework, I was struck across the face with a belt. When I would forget to take out the garbage, he would shove a cigarette into my clothes. When he first started to hit me, he made sure to only hit areas that would be covered up. Soon that wasn't enough for him. There would be nights that I would wake up in bed with my pajama

pants and underwear missing. He would crawl into my bed, completely naked. I cannot count the times he held me down, nearly breaking my wrists as I tried to wiggle myself free. I tried to scream for help, but that only inspired him to tie his belt around my neck and squeeze until I would pass out, leaving him free to do as he wanted. Each morning after it happened, I could feel that something wasn't right "down there." I tried to tell my mom about what happened. I tried telling my teachers at school. I tried telling doctors, cops, even my friends at school but nobody would help me. When the cops did come, they immediately dismissed everything. That is when I finally had enough and tried to kill myself. But something, or rather someone, stopped me.

I tried to hang myself, on a night where I was home alone. My mom went out for dinner as part of Greg's abusive ritual. Whenever he felt "sorry," swearing that he would never do it again, he would treat my mom and me to fancy nights out. That night, I told him that I couldn't because I had to work on a research paper for school that I needed to finish. He tried to convince me to come along anyway, but Mom managed to get him to leave me alone. I didn't know why she did it, but I couldn't help but thankful that she was giving me the space I needed. I waited in my room until I knew my mother and my stepfather were driving away before I set up everything I needed.

The only way out that I saw, the only way I knew of where I wouldn't be dragged right back, was to simply

hang myself. If I tried to run away, the police and social services would only put me back where it all started. And if that happened, the hell that son of a bitch put me and my mom through would only get worse. The only way out, that would maybe get my mom away from my stepfather, was for me to die. I threw some bed sheets tied together over a horizontal support beam in the far corner of my bedroom and fastened the end into a hangman's knot.

My dad (biological dad) showed me how to tie one during our fishing trips, and he also had me swear to him that I would never use it outside of fishing. Where I was mentally, I didn't even consider how my actual father would feel if he saw me like this. All I wanted was to be with him again and be far away from my step father. To hold my body up while I put the loop around my neck, I used an old chair I grabbed out from the dining room. I was too short to stand from the seat of the chair, so I tried my best to maintain my balance while standing on its back. When everything was set, my foot slipped and knocked back the chair before I was ready. I quickly started to choke, but soon I felt like I was floating.

The entire room quickly filled up with this bright blue light that blocked everything in the room. A man with long hair, dressed in a large white robe, appeared out of nowhere just a few feet in front of me. He had circular scars on both sides of his hands, which he ex-

tended to me. The palms of his hands faced the sky, as his eyes stared directly into mine.

"Take my hands, child," he said. I put both of my hands into his and watched as two tiny golden birds perched themselves on my fingers. The man looked as amazed at the sight as I was.

"My dear child," he said, "You are going to be very special one day. Why are you trying to take that away from yourself?"

"Because I hate being hurt by my step-dad. I want to see my real dad again," I answered.

"Shandra, your real father isn't here! Doing what you are doing won't let you see him again."

I started to break down in tears.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because your father is still very much alive! Once you become the strong woman you are destined to become, you will see him again."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"That is for you to discover. But since you did come all this way, there is someone here that would like to talk to you."

"Who?"

"Someone who you will meet again when the time is right."

"Huh?"

I was confused by what the man meant by what he said. If there was somebody with us that wanted to talk to me, but if I had to wait in order to meet them,

then why did he even bring it up? I wanted to ask him about what he meant but, before I could get another word out, he dropped both of his arms and stepped to the side. Standing behind him was a little girl with long black hair. She looked to be about six years old and looked a lot like me. I watched as she lifted her hand and waved at me.

"Hi Mommy," she said.

"What?" I asked.

"I was wanting to see you!" she cheered.

"But I'm not your mom."

"Yes, you are. Well, at least not yet. I can't really explain right now, but I wanted to tell you something."

"What is that?"

"Don't be afraid of the bad guys, you have powers that they are very afraid of. Don't be afraid to fight."

I couldn't help but pause as I noticed two golden wings burst from my back. I didn't feel any pain, but I did feel some sort of raw power surging through my body. It felt like an adrenaline rush but stronger. It felt like something god-like.

"See, Mommy?" the little girl giggled.

"Yeah I do see, Olivia," I said. When I said the name, Olivia, I couldn't help but freeze, wondering where that name came from. "Wait, is that your name?" I asked her.

"Yes! Mommies should always know the names of their own daughters!" Olivia giggled. I couldn't help but laugh at my daughter's answer, even though the

thought of my own flesh and blood finding a way to travel through time just for this moment still didn't settle in my mind. I was staring at a girl who looked like she could be my younger sister, for crying out loud!

"Well, I need to go. But remember, don't be scared of the bad guys," Olivia said, "Show them your powers, Mommy, and they will be very scared of you."

"I will, Olivia. I promise," I told her.

"I know. I will come back to check on you, and on Daddy."

"Who is your dad?" I asked.

"I am not allowed to tell you, that is one of the rules for me to do this. But don't worry, it won't be long before you find him," she answered.

I wanted to ask who was the one giving her the rules, or at least how she was able to do what she did, but she disappeared with the blue lights and the man that brought her. I looked around the room and found myself sitting on my bed. The sheets were spread out on the bed, and the bed itself was made. When I took off the sheets to tie them together, I just threw around my blankets and pillows without caring about where they landed. '

But everything looked as if nothing happened. I wanted to tell someone about what happened, but I didn't want to be treated as a lunatic. At the same time, I didn't want to forget about it either. That raw power Olivia showed me... just what was it? More importantly, how could I possibly use it?

Downstairs I heard my stepfather once again screaming at my mother. His voice was boiling to the point he could barely be understood, but it was enough to draw out small doses of the power. As his voice came closer to my room, I couldn't help but clench my fists together. I didn't feel the fear like I did other times he started to fire his abuse towards me. I felt... anger. I felt like I actually needed to fight. It was like something had taken over my body, something that felt oddly familiar. I soon didn't have any control over what I was doing and found my actual father's old wooden bat in my closet. He was a baseball fan, even taught me how to play when I was little. And when I saw my stepfather come into my room, I swung harder than I ever did before straight into his crotch.

When he folded his body over as a response to the pain, I continued to swing as hard as I could. It felt amazing doing that to him, hearing the bat continually crushing his skin and bones with every blow. It felt liberating. My mother didn't feel the same way and had the police arrest me.

I was charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, and spent time in juvenile hall. I tried to tell the police why I fought, but they didn't listen. None of them seemed to feel that the forty-two fractures I made were signs of self-defense. Once I was let out, neither my mom or my stepfather would talk to me about what had happened. They both became silent around me, only letting out an occasional whispered,

“excuse me.” At first, I felt that they were ashamed of me. But after a few more months, I was corrected. Olivia was right, people were afraid of what I could do.

Whenever I would walk into a room after I started to hear my step-dad raise his voice, he would quickly get up and get out of the house for hours at a time. As time went on, he slowly overcame his fear of me. It took him a few years in order to get back to his old ways in their entirety, but little did I know it was to give the love of my life a chance to make his appearance and end the suffering once and for all.

Chapter 2

Dakota

“Ramona, you stupid bitch!” my stepfather screamed.

It was about six thirty in the morning when he cried out. It was a school day, back in late April of 2011 if I remember correctly. My stepfather's screams pretty much became my alarm clock. He would always be complaining about something, even though most of the time he was hard to understand.

I was surprised that he hadn't physical for almost six years, but I kept getting the vibe that it was going to change quickly. Just to prepare for when it happened, I managed to think of several escape plans so I wouldn't be the first person the cops would try to lock up. Many of which including jumping out of a second story window.

Ever since I met Olivia, I felt like a completely different person. I felt stronger. I felt like I was able to take on anything that came my way. But days before his fi-

nal blowup, I felt distracted. I couldn't focus on him or my mom. For some reason, I felt drawn to school out of all places.

"What is the matter Greg?" my mom asked him.

"Why is it that you can't hurry your fat ass up in the mornings?"

"Greg, I am hurrying up as fast as I can, dear."

I knew that my parents were about to fight again, and I was going to be in the blast zone. My only option was to shower, get dressed, and jump out of my bedroom window with my school supplies cushioning my fall. I always made sure to have a hoodie tucked towards the front of my bag so my textbooks wouldn't tear. School may be a pain but it was my only escape from this hell hole. A bathroom was next to my room, so with luck, I was able to get ready and out the window in about ten minutes.

My hair could wait until I got on the bus that waited in front of the library. Makeup? No point. I couldn't bring a guy home when things were like this. Last time a guy did come around, he became friends with my stepfather and tried to slice my throat open three months later. Dating wasn't important, and because of my lack of boyfriends, I was always accused of being a lesbian by other girls in my class. I put up with the torments, just because I didn't have a way to escape them. If I tried to kill myself, even if the slightest thought of it popped into my head, the image of Olivia would quickly remind me of why I needed to stay. So, more

times than I could count, I tried to analyze guys from school to see which one could be Olivia's father. Sure enough, just to add to my curiosity, Olivia would come around always saying, "Daddy's close." The little monster was teasing me! But after a while, I started to notice that Olivia made her appearances to hint at her dad's identity always happened around the same two class periods each day, both of which were in the afternoon back-to-back. The first class was English, the second was a weird one known as Touchstones.

Our teacher for Touchstones, Ms. Jacobs, kept saying that the title meant to reach important milestones in our lives, but no one really believed her. Many of the guys joked about how the title of the class sounded like a guy checking for testicular cancer, the same ones famous for making teachers break down into tears for how they acted.

God those guys were annoying!

How they behaved made my daughter's hints towards potential father figures somewhat frightening, to be truthful. I kept my fingers crossed that it wasn't them, looking for any way to weed out the possibility. Soon it hit me that Olivia was trying to tell me I actually shared these classes with her father. Which if I remember correctly, there were only five guys I shared both classes with.

Shoot, what were their names?

If I remember correctly, their names were Jason, Mark, Leonard, Austin, and (of course) Dakota. Just

about every other day when Olivia showed up, I couldn't help but stare at each one of them to map out what life could be like if I was to be with them. Jason always gave off a sense of being a lazy slob when he got older. Leonard always seemed to be the type to hide any real intelligence he had, so maybe he wouldn't have been so bad. Austin and Mark seemed like the type of person who would straighten up after school, like becoming big time company CEOs. But Dakota, he was mysterious.

Even though he was big, Dakota always had a way of disappearing right when people thought they knew where he was. Nobody seemed to know much about him. So in many ways, I felt more drawn to him than anyone else. When I would watch him, he seemed more annoyed at the nonsense that came from the other guys in the room than anyone else. He would always clench his fists when the other guys would start acting out in the middle of class. Truth is, and it shouldn't be too much of a surprise but a lot of people were actually kinda afraid of Dakota. They weren't afraid in the sense that they would run away screaming, but enough to start tensing up whenever he was around. Even I was a bit afraid of Dakota after I saw him throw a kid across the hall.

But one day, it all changed.

"Shandra, you're five," said our Touchstones teacher, Ms. Jacobs. The sound of my teacher's voice jerked my attention back to reality. What happened

nearly every day, right towards the end of the school day, my mind would drift off into this dark place. It was almost like an endless abyss, everything around me would be so dark it was impossible to tell the sky from the ground. I would be the only thing that could be seen. It was like I was the only survivor of some massive explosion the took over the entire universe.

Soon voices would start to appear to keep me company, ones that would sound an awful lot like the fights between my step-dad and my mom from later in the day. Maybe that was why my grades weren't the best. For that class period, Ms. Jacobs was making us read from a teen self-help book then we would break off into groups to reenact certain parts. If my memory serves correct, our group was assigned a skit where we would have to act negatively towards a certain situation.

I stood back as I watched all four guys I believed could be the father of my time traveling child, come together in order to make the skit. As the guys started to plan out the details, I watched as Dakota's eyes started to drift in my direction. I couldn't help but wonder if Olivia had led him to me, or even if he knew something that I didn't. All of the guys were huddled around some desks that were bunched together. Mark started to grab some pencils and place them like cars on a busy road.

"Alright, so for the skit, we are going to use the example from the book. The one where a guy gets cut off by a rude driver and starts cussing at him," Mark said.

Jason looked towards Dakota and noticed that his face started to look blank while glancing in my direction. From what I could tell, he knew there was some sort of attraction going on.

"Dakota, focus dude," said Jason.

"Right. Sorry," Dakota said jerking his attention to the plans on the desk, "So what are we planning on doing?"

"Well we are thinking about doing a skit where two guys are driving down the highway than they get cut off by a crazy person," Jason answered while flaring his nose.

"What?" Dakota whined, "Are y'all wanting me to be the other driver?"

"Well you did almost hit me with your car, dude," said Austin.

"Yikes," I quietly giggled to myself. I couldn't help but laugh at the image appearing in my head of Dakota almost running over Austin. Dakota rolled his eyes and sighed.

"Fine, I'll be the driver," he said, "So who all is playing who?"

"I am going to be the director. Jason and Austin are in the first car. You will be in the second car. But, I am not sure about her," said Leonard as he was looking towards me.

Dakota just smiled and said, "I will go see."

"Take your time, dude," encouraged Leonard. Dakota started to walk towards me, practically getting taller

with every step he took. As he got closer, my heart started beating faster than ever before.

"Hey," he said, "Would you like to add in something for the group?"

"No, I don't really work well with groups," I told him. Dakota sat against a heater that was attached to the wall, just underneath a large window. I could tell he wasn't going to go anywhere. Which was fine, I didn't want him to go anywhere.

"Well to be honest, neither do I," he smiled.

"Really?" I asked, "Cause you seem to do alright with them."

"Yeah, I honestly couldn't care less about them," he answered.

My eyes jumped from their sockets a bit when he said that. It was obvious that he didn't care for the other guys that were in our group, but I was surprised that he would come forward about it.

"I see. But shouldn't you get back to them so you can find out everything for the skit?" I asked him.

"No, not really. I got all of the important stuff already. Now they are just talking about some sort of game that was on last night," he said pointing at the group. Figures that they were acting like they were part of a football game, even adding silent crowd cheering sound effects for emphasis.

"Point taken," I giggled.

Dakota looked straight at me as he reached out his hand and said, "Anyway my name is Dakota."

At first, I hesitated. Just by Dakota reaching his hand out for a handshake made my body want to run as fast as it could, and Dakota didn't do anything at all. It was just the guy I was seeing before him, the one who tried to kill me, shook my hand when we met. Yeah I know it sounds stupid, but I didn't want to go through that again.

"Hey, you don't have to be afraid," he said, "The worst I could do to you is hug you a little too tight."

I had to trust him, especially if he was Olivia's father. So I simply smiled and shook his hand. "My name is Shandra," I said as I pulled my hand away.

"Well Shandra, it is nice to meet you. So why don't you tell me about yourself?" he asked.

"Why do you want to know?" I asked him.

"Well, to be honest, I think you are cute and I would like to get to know you better." I could feel two small suns burning inside my cheeks when he said that. To be honest, I felt slightly embarrassed. My head tried to hide what I was feeling by tucking my face into my chest. My hair even turned into curtains as they turned my face into a stage as tears began to start a show.

"Hey is everything alright?" Dakota asked. I pulled my head up and wiped the tears from my eyes while brushing my hair back behind my shoulders.

"Yeah, sorry," I said, "It's just been a while since somebody has ever said something like that to me. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Dakota smiled. "But you don't want to hear about me, I am not all that special."

"Oh, I think you're wrong about that."

"How would you know?"

"I can feel it. I can feel that you are somebody that has dealt with a lot in her lifetime. I can feel that you are searching for something, causing you to go day in and day out trying to put together some sort of understanding of the world in order to find whatever it is. I can also feel that you are looking for somebody to help you understand it."

I could feel Dakota's eyes as they stared into mine. It felt as if he was looking for some sort of sign that I was warming up to him. Truth is, I was starting to... "like," Dakota. Just by what he said I felt freer than I ever had in a long time. I wanted to simply break down in his arms and let my entire world come out to him.

My lips started to quiver as I asked, "Really?"

"Of course," he answered, "These days it is something rare, and in several ways, quite beautiful. Especially in a place like this where everybody obsesses over the most worthless parts of life."

I giggled as the glow from my cheeks started getting bright.

"It seems like everybody in the world is the same way," I said, "Then the ones that know how it really is get tossed aside and get treated like trash."

"Tell me about it."

My mind started to drift off into the darkness again as Dakota and I spoke. I didn't know it at the time, but apparently, he could see that my mind was not in a good place and he knew a special trick to get me to come out. In my mind, I was curled into a corner as several voices would constantly harass me without end. As my head was tucked between my knees, I couldn't help but drain the oceans from my eyes.

"Somebody please help me," I cried.

Instead of my voice being muffled, like in previous times, this happened, my voice echoed drowning out the sound of the endless taunts. Was I getting that raw power back? Or was it something else?

"Somebody please help me," I cried again. This time... the voices were gone and I felt an arm wrapping itself around me. I expected it to start throwing me around, but instead, it gave a gentle squeeze as it guided my head to someone's shoulder.

"I will," whispered a man's voice.

I cracked my eyes open to see where the voice came from, to find Dakota trying his best to comfort me. Once I realized what was happening, the vision disappeared like a dream. Dakota had his hand gently pressed against my shoulder like he was trying to pull me out of a daydream. Did he somehow influence my vision? It felt like he was actually in the vision with me. Did he know that I saw him there? Or was it just all a coincidence?

"How did you do that?" I asked him.

"Long story short, it is how I know you are special," he answered.

"What do you..."

"Are you two working with your group?" Ms. Jacobs interrupted.

"Yeah, we got everything taken care of, Ms. Jacobs," Dakota answered.

"Really?" she nearly shouted, "Then what are you guys doing for the skit?"

Leonard noticed that our teacher was trying to find a way to turn on Dakota for paying attention to things other than the assignment. Which really didn't make sense because Dakota was always one of the ones to get the assignments completed before anyone else, and still hold an A-B average. It wasn't right, or was it Dakota she was after? Was she targeting me?

"We are doing a skit where two guys that are driving off the highway get cut off by a crazy driver that only ends up crashing," Leonard added.

"Really?" Ms. Jacobs says while staring at Dakota, "So then, Dakota, what are you playing?"

"I am the crazy driver," he answered. Ms. Jacobs turned to me and asked, "and you are playing as?"

"I am a bystander to the crash," I replied.

"Alright," she whispered as she turned to the rest of the class, "You all have a couple more minutes until we start the reenactments."

Dakota turned to face me and grinned.

"See? Everything I needed to know," he joked. Dakota's humorous side didn't lighten the situation. I fucking hated the teacher for how she was talking to us. Where did she get off? In fact, where did anyone get off talking like that?

"Is everyone around here that judgmental?" I nearly growled. Dakota looked like he was wanting to deny my allegations, but I could see him swallowing something he wanted to say. Instead, he took a deep breath as he thought of something new to say.

"Just about," he answered, "But keep your eyes open, you will find the few good ones laying around."

"I hope you're right. Back at my old school nobody was kind," I told him.

"I don't know, I wasn't really liked by a lot of people back at my old school and everyone would just keep harassing me about it. It seemed to be the same way at every school I would go to."

"I know how you feel. It's pathetic how people treat one another these days."

"Exactly! You never know what people might do for you in the long run that might help you out."

"I'm glad to finally meet someone else that sees that."

"Well you know the saying, 'The most knowledgeable are the most neglected in masses of the idiotic', it seems to become truer every day."

"I have never heard it put quite like that before, yet it pretty much covers it all. I'm impressed."

"Thanks."

Something about what Dakota was doing made me feel more open. I felt warmer. I felt, freer. I felt like a better life was coming together for me. I wanted to continue talking with Dakota, in fact, it felt like I could talk to him about anything... forever.

"Alright everyone, back to your seats we need to get started on the skits," shouted the teacher.

'Damn it!' I mentally screamed.

All of the guys in my group, except Dakota, threw their arms into the air to volunteer us to go first.

"I guess it's showtime," Dakota joked.

"I guess so," I told him.

Dakota started to walk towards his desk as the teacher ordered. But before he had a chance to leave, I wrapped my arms around him as he turned away.

"Thank you," I whispered to him. He didn't say anything, but a smile grew on his face. As my arms pried away from his body and we both sat in our desks, Ms. Jacobs got ready to get the skits started out.

"Dakota! Who all is in your group?" Ms. Jacobs asked.

"Shandra, Austin, Leonard, Jason, Mark and myself," Dakota answered.

"Do you have your skit ready?"

"Heck yeah!" Mark interrupted.

"Then get up there," she said trying to rush us.

The guys all ran to the front of the classroom to set up the skit while I stood by the window as a bystander.

An office chair was placed just a few feet behind a desk. I couldn't figure out what they were planning since I noticed Dakota with an evil look on his face. He had something in mind that was different from the other guys, something absolutely goofy. Considering he was holding his arms in the air and started flapping it around like he was dancing in a topless sports car. Needless to say, the loud screaming noises and Dakota rolling over a desk. It was the funniest thing I ever saw. When Dakota looked like he was hurt, the entire class jumped out of their seats laughing.

"Dakota are you alright?" asked Ms. Jacobs when she could finally catch her breath.

Dakota got up, slightly dazed from the ordeal, and answered, "Yeah, I'm fine, just uh got a little carried away with the scene, that is all."

"Well no kidding dude, you weren't supposed to do that!" said Mark.

"You know what, it made it better didn't it?" Dakota replied.

"You guys do have to admit what Dakota did made your skit funnier. A's for all of you," said Ms. Jacobs.

"Well there you go!" shouted Dakota.

'My god, he is a lunatic!' I laughed in my head.

"Did you enjoy the show?" Dakota asked quietly.

Somehow, right after the set was demolished, Dakota managed to sneak his way to the side of my desk with a big smile on his face. I couldn't help but start laughing again and nodding my head.

"Awesome," he grinned.

Yep, Dakota was definitely a guy worth figuring out. Something told me that a lot of people have been trying to crack him, with very little success. Who knew, maybe I would be the one to make it through the mold. I couldn't really pay attention the rest of class for the rest of the day. What I saw with Dakota stuck itself in my head, constantly replaying itself. Even during gym class, I couldn't get his image out of my mind, but truthfully I didn't try.

It was a much nicer image than what was normally on my mind. But when I got home that night, a fist to my nose and a belt around my neck took me out for the night. At least for most of the night. I woke up in the middle of the night and found myself in my bedroom, fully clothed in my pajamas.

"Are you okay mommy?" asked a familiar voice.

"Who is there?" I asked. A bright blue light appeared by my bedside, one that nearly burned my eyes out of their sockets. Soon a little girl appeared from the light, my little girl.

"Hey, Olivia. How is everything?"

"Good! I was just with Daddy!"

"How is he?" "

Good. He was just working."

"He has a job? Cool!"

"Yeah, he helps people. But not like a doctor, he helps with problems people can't see. He will be able to help you, soon."

"How?"

"You will see. But, you should probably talk to Grandma. She is awake right now, worried about you."

"Really why?"

"She is feeling guilty. Just talk to her about your day."

Why should I talk to her when she was letting this happen to me? I wanted to say no, but seeing Olivia made me think otherwise. It would be nice to just be able to sit down and talk with my mom for once. It would just be nice to be able to tell her a guy was catching my attention.

Before I could say anything else to her, Olivia disappeared. Not being able to say anything else, I started to think more about my mom. Somehow, I started to feel like about to lose her. Ever feel like a deep pit grows inside of you when you start to think you are about to lose someone? I kept getting that feeling, so I went downstairs just so I could have a few more minutes with her.

Sure enough, when I got downstairs, I found my mother laying back while working on a crochet pattern. She always loved to crochet something when she felt tired but couldn't sleep.

"Hey mom," I moaned, "What'cha working on?"

"Just the cherry blossom pattern I never finished," she answered, "What are you doing up?"

"Couldn't get back to sleep. I've got a lot like on my mind lately."

"Like what?"

'How about why I don't remember anything between now and when I came home from school?' I thought to myself, "There is this guy from school I can't really get out of my head."

"Oh really?" she asked while turning her head to face me. She continued to crochet without looking directly at the pattern. When I was little, I thought my mom was part robot whenever she did that. She never messed up!

"Yeah, he seems to be different from the other guys at school," I told her.

"That is what you said about the last guy you went out with, do you need to be reminded of what happened?" she asked.

"No, Mom, I don't," I answered, "This guy is way different from John."

"How so?"

"This one doesn't really care much for other guys at school. John always was cocky around his friends, Dakota is just quiet."

"So his name is Dakota, huh? Can you tell me anything else about him?"

"Well, we just started talking, so I can't really say much," I told her. *'How about the fact that I have been seeing a small girl who claims to be my daughter and he just MIGHT be the father?'* I thought to myself, *'Even though there are at least three other guys that could be it?'*

"Alright," she nodded, "Can you at least tell me what he looks like?"

"Trust me, Mom, you would know him when you saw him?"

"How so?"

"He is like freakishly tall! I actually thought he was a senior."

"Really? Is he the type of guy who is really tall and skinny or..."

"Actually, he looks like he would be a really good football player. But he acts like he doesn't really care much for sports."

"Then what does he care for, you know, activity wise? And are you sure?"

"I don't know. Like I said, we haven't had much time to talk."

"Why, hun?"

"We were put in a group together in class and the teacher interrupted us before we could talk further."

"Hun, if he didn't try to find a way to talk with you more he might not be interested."

"Don't worry, he did find a way."

"Well tell me!"

"During a skit that our group put together, he actually made it a point to make everybody in class jump out of their chairs laughing."

"How?"

I went on to explain to my mom everything Dakota did to make every face in class turn forty shades of red

all at once. Just by me telling about what happened, my mom laughed so hard she lost track of her place in the crochet pattern.

“Right as everyone calmed down, he came over to ask me whether or not I liked what he did.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I couldn't say anything because I started laughing again. So I just nodded my head. He seemed glad.”

“Then I hope to meet this young man soon.”

Needless to say, she soon got her chance.

Chapter 3

“Dakota is The One”

Apparently, the cops were watching my house for the previous couple of days. They never came in to check on me. They never tried to help me. They just sat in their cruiser and drove away whenever they got bored or had another call. I didn't see them much, and when I did I simply was too pissed off at them for not doing anything.

The day after I met Dakota, tensions at home were at an all time high. Furniture seemed to sprout legs and leap in every direction possible. The microwave and couch joined hands and leaped through the wall. Plates shattered in laughter as they fell to the floor. Elephants trampled and screamed through the roof. A circus of Hell would rise from the ground every chance it got, but with every Saturday came the day the circus

needed to go grocery shopping, and give the performers a chance to rest. Every Saturday was grocery day.

The ride to the grocery store was probably the most we looked like a normal family. Just a man, woman, and child out running weekend errands were all outsiders would ever see. I wore a turtleneck and acted like I had a bit of a cold to cover the bruises left by my step-dad. Nobody outside of the side ever knew something was wrong. Perhaps the saddest part of it all was I looked forward to grocery shopping because my stepfather always stayed in the car. It would just be me and my mom. No yelling, no fighting, just quiet time. We always took our time in the store, just talking about normal mother-daughter stuff in between each "Hey can you grab this," and, "Hey can we get this?"

Needless to say, it was nice while it lasted.

"Shandra, honey can you go grab the mini corn dogs? The ones you like?" my mom asked.

"Sure thing, anything else while I am over there?" I asked her.

"No, not that I can think of."

I walked through the store to find the mini corn dogs that were a few aisles away. The employees had been trying to redecorate the store for a few weeks thanks to a new crap load of corporate funding. When I got into the aisle I was looking for, I noticed that what I was wanting was a little higher than I could reach. Feeling stupid in front of a man that pulled up with his cart behind me, I started to jump in order to reach the box,

quietly joking about wishing Dakota was there to be my human ladder.

"Here, let me get that for you," he said.

"Oh, thank you," I said backing away. The man was very tall, so tall he was able to practically reach into the freezers while standing clear across an aisle about four feet wide. I didn't pay much attention to what he looked like, other than he looked kinda tired. But once he handed me the box, I couldn't believe who I saw.

"Dakota!" I nearly squealed like a little kid.

"Surprise!" he smiled, "I happened to be passing through and thought you could have used a little help."

"I am glad that you did. When I couldn't reach it I was starting thinking of you," I said blushing. *'How does he keep making me blush?'*

"I hope that is a good thing."

"It is," I told him.

My eyes happened to drift towards his shopping cart full of groceries. I was surprised by what I saw since I figured most guys my age would mostly get snacks and drinks. But no, not Dakota, he was actually grocery shopping.

"Is that your cart?" I asked.

"Yeah, I am just grabbing some stuff for my house," he answered.

"Oh really? Where are your parents?" The look on Dakota's face that grew after I asked him about his family seemed to want to dance around what he was

wanting to say. It was almost like he was slightly embarrassed.

"I, uh, actually live by myself," he finally answered.

'How?' I asked in my head, "Really? Where do you live?"

"I live in the large gray house on Eastlake, the one across from the cemetery."

"Oh yeah, I have seen you around there before. But how can you afford to live there by yourself? It's a pretty shitty economy and hardly anybody can hold together their own life."

"Well, I helped with a few projects in areas above what the recession is affecting."

'What projects?' I asked in my head, "You're lucky. Maybe I can come by sometime?"

"Sure, I got no problem with it. I have plenty of room," he answered.

"Cool," I smiled.

'Is he telling the truth? Someone our age shouldn't be that lucky. Now I am curious about him,' I thought to myself.

I wanted to take more time to mentally analyze Dakota, but my mother speaking up drew away my thought process.

"Shandra I got the... who is this?" she asked.

"Oh hey, Mom. This is my friend Dakota, the one I told you about from school," I answered.

"Oh yeah, you weren't kidding. He is huge." Dakota reached his hand and said, "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise Mr. Frandsen. And please call me Ramona," she said when grabbing Dakota's hand. I could feel my mom mentally prepare how to skin Dakota alive as their hands touched. But... how did she know his last name? Hell, I didn't know his last name at the time! I knew she had weird tricks, but that was just plain creepy. Soon, she added to the uneasiness as she turned her head to face me.

"Shandra, please head back over to the produce. I think I forgot the tomatoes for salad tonight."

"But mom...." I said. "Just go do it," my mom grunted.

'Fine, just please don't scare him away. I don't know if you're soon to be granddaughter might stick!' I mentally screamed as I did as I was told.

The voices of my mother and my friend quickly faded away. I hurried over to the produce section, which was on the other side of the store, and quickly sorted through several old tomatoes just to try and find the freshest looking pair. Once I found the good tomatoes, I wrapped two in plastic wrap and hurried back to my mom and Dakota while praying Dakota wasn't gone. As I walk back into the aisle, I saw my mom and Dakota in the same position I left them in. The bits of conversation I heard between the two, I can never forget.

"If something were to happen to your daughter I could, make that I will, personally make sure they used everything to find her and put down the sick bastards that hurt her, even if it means soaking my own hands in their blood just so I could carry her home," said Dakota,

"I know I just said I was just hoping to be friends with Shandra, but in all honesty something about her makes me pray that someday something much more would bring us together."

My mom and Dakota didn't seem to notice that I was back. So I snuck around them both to slid the tomatoes in the cart without noticing.

"I am going to hold you to that," my mom said.

"I wouldn't expect anything less," Dakota replied.

'Oh, thank god,' I mentally screamed while wrapping my arms around Dakota.

"Thank you," I said to him. Dakota wrapped his arms around me. It felt good to hear his pulse against my cheek. It finally felt like someone actually cared about me. I could feel his eyes staring down at me. He wasn't being cocky, or rude in any way, he was just a giant. I wanted to spill all of my secrets to him right then and there, but my mind wouldn't spill anything. So I slid my body up just right, so the scars on my neck could be seen better. I prayed that he would see them and know right away that I was being hurt.

The change in his heart told me that he got the message, and he was thinking about doing something about it. While his body parted ways from mine, he started to dig into his pockets and pull out a tiny card with a bunch of information on it.

"Here, take this," he told me.

"What is it?" I asked him.

"My card," he answered, "If you need help with anything, or just someone to talk to, don't be afraid to get a hold of me. Day or night, I will always answer."

I carefully looked at the card Dakota gave me just so I could memorize everything in case I lost it.

The card read, "*Dakota Frandsen – Paranormal Investigator. Founder of the Paranormal Raider Force. Phone number – (208) 555-8773. Website – <http://frandsen-files.webs.com/>.*"

"Thank you," I told him while starting to tear up again. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Even though Dakota and I had just met, he was already willing to help me. It almost felt like some sort of fairy tale was coming to life before my very eyes. Better yet, it was a fairy tale about me. A young girl who brings together her parents at a time where they needed each other the most, oh the things that could happen!

My mom and I started to walk away from Dakota, as I tucked the card into my pants pocket, without saying anything else. It felt very rude, but in both of our heads, we knew that it wasn't going to be the last time we saw each other. We made our way towards the registers. Dakota was about three aisles away from us and started talking with an old woman who was working the register. Judging by the way they were talking, they knew each other for a long time, and there was some bad news.

Dakota quickly came to tears from what he heard. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but soon I would

get my own bad news. A text message popped up on my mom's phone. Her ring tone sounded like deep marching drums, from Hell. Something that she was forced to put on her phone, by my stepfather, from Hell! My mom looked down at her phone to read the message.

"Shandra, honey, we better hurry," she said, "Your step dad is getting cranky again."

"Mom, when isn't he cranky," I nearly shouted.

"Hey, don't talk about him like that. Something doesn't feel right."

"Since when were the things he put us through ever right?!" I froze the second those words came out of my mouth. I didn't know why I said them, but it felt very good.

"I know, I know. Just help me hurry these out to the car so we can get out of here," my mother admitted. We hurried as fast as we could through the register and ran outside. I kept looking back at Dakota, hoping that he would see that something was wrong.

When he acted like he didn't notice anything, I gave up and prepared for the worst. The moment my mom and I hit the front, sliding doors, we could hear my stepfather's screaming as it nearly broke through all of the windows in every car in the parking lot. Opening the trunk of the car to load the groceries made his shouting become forty thousand times louder! As my mom and I nearly threw all of our groceries into the trunk, I noticed that Dakota was talking on his phone

while looking in all different directions. I tried my best to avoid looking at him so my stepfather wouldn't start targeting me or him because he thought there was something going on between us. In many ways, there was something but even I didn't know what the heck it was.

My stepfather chasing Dakota away was the last fucking thing I needed. My mother and I jumped into the car, once the groceries were in the trunk, and drove away from Dakota like a bat out of Hell. Mom always drove the car, since Greg always threw a fit. I couldn't count the times he was hard to understand because of his constant yelling, much like he was acting in the car. But when I could understand him, I was able to find out he had survived an IED while over in Iraq. I know now that he was dealing with PTSD, but back then I would swear how jumpy his reactions would get were because of some sort of demons tormenting him. What was worse, was that I heard demons myself saying that I should "save him" by slicing his throat open.

What scares me is that it sounded like a very good idea. I couldn't ever bring myself to do it, but each day I had taken a belt to the neck or was stripped naked by him before bed, I wished I would do it. When we got home, that urge grew as he dragged my mother and I by our hair into the house and started to throw us around like rag dolls. Our heads were tossed through furniture. The microwave and TV tore through the walls and shattered any trace of glass on the family photos.

"Greg, honey, what is the matter?" cried my mom as blood started to spill from her mouth like drool from a hound.

"SHUT UP, YOU STUPID BITCH!" he screamed. As his focus turned to charging towards my mom, I hurried to grab a knife from the kitchen. The evil voices in my head grew stronger.

"Now is your chance," they said, "Kill him now! Protect your mother!"

I didn't argue with them. I didn't want to argue. Something needed to be done. That day was the worst I had ever seen him. He was way beyond the point of control, passing the point of disturbed man and became a rabid animal. He needed to be put down. I grabbed the largest knife I could find and hurried back to confront the bastard. I found him bashing my mother's face into the coffee table. Her blood might as well have become a sketch artist for the evening. I wanted it to end, and as I rushed to his back, I could finally see it happening.

With one large thrust into his spine, I managed to trade in my mother's beating for a broken nose that crawled its way to my brain. I tried to hold back the blood with the palms of my hands and soon found myself dodging knives as I ran up the stairs. I couldn't stop the bleeding, I couldn't stop him. I needed help. I needed Dakota. I ran into my room and tried to find Dakota's card in my pants once I felt the blood stop coming out of my nose but I couldn't find it. Thinking

that it must've fallen out I started dialing 911 on my cell phone. What I heard on the other end of the line, perhaps scared me more than anything else.

"911 what is your emergency?" asked a woman's voice.

"Yes, I need help. My stepfather has gone crazy. He is going to kill my mom!" I cried into the phone.

Out of nowhere, some sort of repetitive, high pitched feedback interrupted the conversation. Then some sort of robotic breathing took over the line. "Is this Shandra Ford?" the robot voice asked.

"Yes..." I answered, "Who is this?"

"Someone who has been watching over you for a very long time. I know you are scared but just please, hang tight. The police are already on their way to you right now. "

"But, how did they..."

"There is no time to explain," the robot interrupted, "You will be fine, my little Cherry Blossom."

My eyes jumped out of my head. There was only one person who called me by that name.

"Dad?" I asked. As soon as I asked, the line went dead. It couldn't have been my father, he died years before that day. But who else would've known?

Before I could try to figure out what was going on, the whole house began to shake as the front door was kicked in. My stepfather's rampage immediately froze.

"Police! Get down on the ground right now!" shouted a man downstairs.

"Get the fuck out of my house!" Greg screamed.

"We can't do that. You are going to come with us before this gets any more out of hand!" shouted another man.

"Fuck you! Did the cunt upstairs call you?!" Greg demanded to know.

"I cannot tell you that, sir. But right now you need to put that gun down or I will make sure that you won't be able to walk away from this!" shouted the first man.

Greg, probably grunting like a caveman, accepted the man's warning as a challenge and charged him. Four gun shots yanked the tortured screams out of my stepdad. Someone finally put a bullet into him.

"Go upstairs, see if anyone is here," suggested the second man, "Yeah, we are going to need a med unit or two. Looks like this domestic got pretty bad."

I heard footsteps press against the wooden steps. About a third of the way up the stairs, the man stopped and shifted his weight.

"Cortez, we got a blood trail leading all the way to a bedroom. Looks mostly like a really bad nose bleed," said the first man.

"Be careful," said Cortez. "

Is there anyone up here?" asked the first man.

'Mommy, it's okay,' said Olivia's voice in my head, 'He is a cop and a friend of Daddy's.'

I had to believe her. This had to be my chance to get away from it all. "I'm in here!" I shouted. The man

walked in with his gun drawn. Olivia was right he was a police officer.

"Are you alright?" he asked. I shook my head, no. I wasn't alright. My nose was nearly shoved straight into my brain.

"What is your name, sweetie?" asked the officer.

"Shandra," I answered. "Well Shandra, my name is Officer Jerome. Can you tell me what happened?"

"My stepdad, he went nuts while we were grocery shopping. Then when we got home, he started throwing my mom and I around. I tried to stop him myself but he was too strong and used the back of his head to break my nose," I answered, "So I ran up here to stop the bleeding."

"Okay," he whispered, "How did you try to stop him?"

"I stabbed him in the back, up by his shoulder," I answered before bursting down into tears. I could feel the salt washing away the blood from my hands as they pressed against my face. I could hear the metal of officer Jerome's pistol sliding against the fabric of his holster and the button click as he secured it.

"Hey, it's going to be alright. It is over now," Jerry said as he kneeled in front of me, "Here, let me take a look."

I moved my hands as Jerome started to press his fingers against my skin. I could feel my body wanting to jump straight into the sky as my nerves panicked about being hurt further.

"Does it hurt?" the officer asked.

"Yeah, a lot," I answered.

"We will have the paramedics check you out," he said, "Just wait here a moment, I need to talk with my partner. Is there a restroom up here?"

"Yeah, do you mind if I use it to wash up?" "That was what I was about to suggest," he answered, "I'll come back to get you."

"Okay."

As Officer Jerome walked back down the stairs, I hurried into the bathroom to wash up. I looked outside to find two police cars parked in the grass in front of my house. A third showed up with what looked like an attack dog. There was some fuss downstairs that sounded like my stepdad continued to put up a fight. The dog was let out of the car, and his handler lets him charge inside the house.

I could hear it growl downstairs as it went after Greg. I could hear the cops beating and tazing him downstairs as his body beat against the floor like a fish out of water. Within minutes two of the police officers had Greg in cuffs and took him out to the back of a patrol car. At the same time, one of the officer's came back up stairs.

"Shandra, are you still up here?" Jerome asked.

"Yeah, I am in the bathroom," I yelled.

"Why don't we get you out of here? There is someone here that wants to see you."

"Huh? Who would want to see me?"

"Perhaps the type of person you need to see right now. Someone who knows how to spot living nightmares better than most people," he answered, "Someone who you go to school with."

I had a flashback of Dakota and his card. *'Could it have been him?' I asked myself, 'That is impossible. The cops wouldn't call on anyone who wasn't in civil services to help with a domestic disturbance.'*

Outside I heard a car screech behind a cruiser. The window was one those windows that were made to make anything on the other side seem blurred and distorted. I could tell it was a larger man that came out of the car and he was rushing to the house. One officer stopped him as the large man made it to the yellow police tape.

"Get Officer Jerome out here!" he shouted.

"We better get down there," said Jerome. I nodded and started to follow him downstairs. As our feet hit the bottom step, I could make out more about who was outside my house. Like piranhas to a bloody bird that fell in the water, the place was swarmed with cops.

"It's alright Cortez, I called him here," shouted officer Jerome. Officer Jerome wrapped his arm around me as he took me out of the house. Everything was much more destroyed than I remembered. The doorway was practically torn in two. Everything was coated in a red hue, maybe it was because my own eyes were so messed up. The sunlight felt like my face was being

shoved into a campfire, so I tried to bury into Officer Jerome's jacket as we stepped outside.

"Are you sure?" asked Cortez. I lifted my head just to look around. I saw people in other houses just watching to see what was going on and cops standing around to keep people away. I was trying to scan for anyone that would have to come to get me. Maybe one of my grandparents or aunts I told everything to, or even a friend from school.

But once I saw Dakota, I knew what Olivia had told me was the truth. He was going to be the one to get me out of that mess. I felt overwhelmed and excited with adrenaline rushing through my body. Soon I found myself dangling from his neck. My body pressing against his skin felt like I was being crushed by a flaming boulder. I knew he didn't mean to hurt me since it was hard for him to have a tender touch. But I didn't care for the simple reason I knew he wasn't going to hurt me, otherwise, Olivia wouldn't have come back to make sure we came together. I was so drawn to him, my arms started to squeeze him at the same strength his arms were holding me as I started to feel the bones in his neck pressing against the bones in my arms.

"Never mind then," sighed Cortez. I could hear officer Jerome approach Cortez from behind me. I could barely see, from the corner of my eye, those two as they stood next to each other. Jerome placed his hand on Cortez's shoulder.

"Why don't you move along?" Jerome asked, "I need to talk with these two real quick before med-units arrive."

"Yeah," Cortez replied while brushing the hand off his shoulder, "I'll go see what the hold-up is."

Cortez walked out of my vision as he approached his car to use his radio. Dakota tried to be gentle as he wrapped his arms around me. I don't know how, but it felt like he was closing me off from the world. I didn't feel anything, not the stress of having cops surrounding my house, not the fear of dying, not the pain from my injuries, nothing. I felt nothing but peace. I tried to adjust my head so I could see officer Jerome better. I wanted to know what he was needing to say, as he started to tuck his thumbs underneath his belt.

"So what's the situation?" Dakota asked.

"She and her mom got beat up pretty bad, I think that both will be okay but we need have med-units examine both before they leave the scene," Jerome answered, "Can you hold out? I know you probably have some things to look through from your last case."

"Yeah, I can stay for as long as I am needed."

"Then you might be here for a while." I saw officer Cortez start waving his hand towards officer Jerome.

"Hey Jerry!" he shouted, "Can I get you to come here for a minute?"

Jerome turned his head and shouted, "Yeah, just hold on a second," before looking me in the eyes and asked, "You guys going to be okay?"

Dakota and I both shook our heads unanimously.

"Good," Jerome replied just before he started jogging towards Cortez.

Dakota moved his head just right to pry my hands apart so he could lead me to the hood of his car. As his body sank the front of the car, I draped my legs over his to make myself comfortable.

"Do your legs hurt?" he asked me.

"It hurts when you hold me," I whispered.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I just wish that was all that it was."

"You and me both." Finally, he had started talking to me. To this day, I didn't know why he waited until we were alone to ask how I was doing. Parts of me thought he was only pretending to care. But as I dug myself further into his chest, and started to hear the sound of his heart beating, I knew that his concerns were real.

I must've shivered while he was holding me because he adjusted his arms so that more of his body heat would reach my body. I didn't know how he did it at the time, but as his heart started to settle against my skin, I could feel all of my injuries start to heal by themselves. This sensation of a warm blanket covering me during a winter storm took over my entire body as I could feel every pain I felt slowly disappearing. If I hadn't known better, I would have sworn I was in the presence of an angel that was covering me with his wings. Suddenly, Dakota jerked when the sounds of an

ambulance siren quickly grew louder. The jerk seemed to rip away the blanket and stop the healing process.

My entire body felt slightly better, but it was still hard for me to move. I wanted to keep the image of Dakota and myself isolated from the world burned into my mind, so I kept my eyes sealed shut so it wouldn't escape.

"Can you get up?" Dakota asked.

"No," I answered.

"Okay," he said, "The paramedics are finally here. They need to make sure that you're okay before I can take you out of here."

"Please, carry me."

"I will."

With a careful bounce, Dakota rose from the hood of his car and started to carry me toward the ambulance. From behind us I could the car uncompromising and adjust itself to a normal position. I slowly opened my eyes to find my mom, still inside the house, with a smile on her face as Dakota carried me. We were finally getting away.

I cringed a little as I felt my bottom touch the cold metal tailgate of the ambulance. Dakota took two steps back to give room for two women to start checking me. They both looked exhausted from a long day's work. They pressed their fingers against various spots on my body, asking how much it hurt. I gave them numbers from a scale from one to ten in order to rate the pain.

Once they got all of their readings on a clipboard, they started to shine a flashlight in my eyes to check for a concussion. I felt a second gust of energy throughout the field examination, which helped me pass. While being prodded by the two paramedics, Dakota and officer Jerome walked away together and started to talk about what was going. They both acted like they were old crime-fighting partners, officer Jerome being the paranoid sidekick and Dakota being the courageous, smart-ass leader that always took the group into dangerous territory.

I could barely make out what they were saying, but I knew it was about me.

"Alright, honey, it looks like you are going to be alright. Just make sure to take it easy for a few days and clean yourself up once you get the chance," said one of the paramedics.

"Okay, so does that mean I can go?" I asked.

"Yeah," answered the other paramedic, "Just be careful, alright? Don't get too rough with your boyfriend."

"He is not my boyfriend!" I blushed, "I don't know what he is."

"Honey, he came for you at a time like this," said the first paramedic, "That should be enough to say he is capable of being someone much more important. Just go talk to him, you will see."

"Alright," I said while getting off the back of the ambulance, "Thank you."

"Take care." As I walked towards Dakota and officer Jerome, I watched as another team of paramedics loaded my stepfather into the other ambulance and drive away. Very few people seemed to actually notice that he was gone. Officer Jerome was overtaking Dakota's attention as he was rambling about what was going on.

"I am just saying that you need to find a way to separate yourself otherwise you will only end up getting yourself killed if something happens," officer Jerome said before pausing.

Officer Jerome turned his head to face me. Dakota took a second to notice where Jerome's attention was focused then turned to finally see I was around.

"Hey. How did it go?" he asked me.

"Fine," I answered, "They just said that I should just take it easy for a few days."

"Good. That can easily be arranged."

Dakota glanced back at officer Jerome. The look on his face suggested that he had something planned for me.

"What do you mean? What is gonna happen now?" I asked him, slightly panicked.

"We are going to place you under protective custody," answered officer Jerome, "At least for a couple weeks while the investigation continues."

'What?! What did he mean?' I thought to myself, "A couple weeks? I don't want to go to some foster home

for a couple weeks, the people there could be much worse!”

“I know, I know,” Jerome stressed, “But we have an arrangement that would benefit everyone, even though in most cases it would be impossible to pull off. You will be staying with a close partner of mine here in town. That way you won't miss anything at school and you won't have to worry about getting moved around the state. Plus if you ever run into trouble, I'd much rather prefer that you would be around him than anyone else. He will take care of you.”

“What do you mean? Who is it?!” I asked. Dakota answered by giving a playful two-fingered salute.

“Dakota?” I asked confused. The whole thought of me being put under the care of someone the same age as me was weird, and in no way could be legal. Thousands of thoughts started to run through my head. How the heck would that be possible? And why would he want to take in someone like me?

“I figured that coming with me would be a more favorable outcome to all of this,” Dakota answered.

‘O...kay, I guess if it is okay,’ I thought to myself, “Are you sure? I wouldn't want to impose.”

“It is no imposition. I made a promise to always answer your call, this is one of those answers. There is plenty of everything for both of us at my place.”

“So... you're serious?”

“Yes, I am.”

"Thank you. Not a lot of guys would do that for a girl they just met."

Dakota acted like he was about to say something else, but officer Jerome interrupted and said, "I hate to interrupt this loveydovey moment, but the social workers are on their way and they will try to tear apart our arrangement. So Shandra, why don't you get about two weeks worth of stuff packed up?"

"Alright," I answered, "But can you come with me, Dakota?"

"Sure thing," he answered. I reached my hand out with my palm facing the sky. Dakota took a few seconds to think before grabbing my hand. I could tell that he had his own thoughts about taking me in, possibly ones that were telling him that he should've turned me away. But, if he was willing to take the risk, I figured it wouldn't hurt to make the same wager. I walked him through my house, as people in jackets with the word "FORENSICS" written on the backs were looking around.

The cracking of glass under our feet made the air feel like the aftermath of an earthquake. I could tell Dakota was looking around at the damage, waiting for some story about what happened to come to him. When we walked up the stairs, I could tell he was making mental notes of the blood. The way he reacted was a lot like the forensics teams, quiet and distant from the scene. Once we entered my room, I let go of Dakota's hand and grabbed the first bag I could find so

I could start packing. Dakota turned his back against me so he wouldn't see anything.

'At least chivalry isn't dead,' I thought to myself.

Dakota continued to be silent while I packed up. I wanted him to start talking, but I was afraid of what he would have said something diminishing about what happened. Was he going to be all, "Dude, this is awful," or "This looks like a movie," and be completely insensitive? My own anxieties tore away at every thought of him being a legitimately good person, even though he would quickly prove to be just that.

"So, how did it happen?" he asked. I didn't want to go far into detail, and I knew that he knew how I felt. But I figured I might as well say something. It hurt to say anything, but I might as well tell him how I felt about it all since it was clear we were going to be seeing a lot of each other.

"Uh... my parents got into a fight, then my dad got a little rough. I tried to stop them but I only made it worse. When it kept going I hurried upstairs to call the police, but then the lady said they were already on their way so I started to freak out..." I answered while choking on my tears.

The sunlight started to brush against my skin as the clouds stopped hiding it away. The house suddenly felt warmer than it ever did. Tiny stars reflected onto the ceiling from the silver designs on a pair of pants I was packing away. The glare of the light made me turn to look Dakota directly in the eye. I could tell he was look-

ing into my eyes, trying to read my mind. I started to walk his way for a hug, but right when I was at his feet I collapsed and burst into tears. I couldn't hold it in anymore, and I knew Dakota was looking for it to happen. He made sure to dive in order to keep me from drowning, and I couldn't help but grip onto him for dear life.

"Dakota," I cried, "This is all my fault. I should have done more to stop this when this all began!"

I felt a bit of a pressure in Dakota's chest when I said that. I could tell he was starting to cry as well at what happened. He was trying to be my rock.

"Let's get you on the bed," he said to get his mind away from the sadness a bit. He walked me back over to my bed, next to where I had my bag sitting, and sat down next to me. He guided my head to his chest. I could hear his heart try to comfort me as he gently drew tiny hearts just a little above my left eye with his pointer finger.

Something about what he was doing was helping me relax. He and I just kept silent, not saying anything further about what was going on around us until I heard him swallow so he could prepare something new to say.

"This was not your fault," he whispered, "None of this was ever your fault."

"Yes... it is," I told him, "All of my family blames me for this ever since it started."

"Shandra, don't let them make you believe that. None of this was your fault."

"But... I could have stopped it. I could have saved him when he came back from the war."

"There was nothing you could have done. Trust me, I know what it is like to feel guilty about the pain you see when a loved one is hurt. I know just how much you would do just to fix what has been done. And I know just how much it hurts when there is nothing you could do."

I sat up when he claimed he knew just how much I hurt from what happened. I wiped off my tears and asked, "How would you know?"

"I think that we need to get you out of here and relaxed before I can say anything," he said.

'Smart move,' I thought to myself. But another part of me knew he was right.

"Okay," I said. I stood up and continued packing while Dakota sat for a few moments so he could wipe his own tears away. He watched what I put into my bag, hopefully just to make a note of everything. I didn't really pay attention to what I put into my bag at the time, other than a small stuffed polar bear with a red heart on its chest. It was a gift from my biological father the Christmas before he died. I was expecting some sort of sarcastic comment from him when I set the bear inside the bag, but he didn't say anything about it.

"Do you have everything?" he asked.

I nodded my head, "yes."

'I just want to leave,' I whispered in my mind.

"Then let's go," he said. I jumped when he responded to what I was thinking. It was the first time he ever responded to something I was thinking about. Was it just a freak coincidence? Something told me that it wasn't.

"How did you do that?" I asked.

"You will see soon enough," he answered. I zipped up my bag and walked to Dakota's side. He took me under his arm and placed a kiss on my forehead. It was the one sign I needed all this time, just to know someone was looking out for me. Inside me, I felt the growing need for him, one that would eventually lead to the birth of our daughter. My eyes locked themselves into his and I could see he was feeling the same way. He slowly leaned down as I jumped up to seal the kiss.

When our lips touched, it felt like the entire world just stopped. My entire body suddenly became warmer. It felt calm, relaxing, almost something like out the movies. It felt like a fairytale. I didn't think such things actually existed. After what seemed like forever, I lifted my lips from his and just hung from his neck. Dakota then placed his forehead against mine, with his eyes closed as a smile grew on his face.

"Shall we get out of here?" he asked. I nodded my head and giggled as Dakota snuck one more kiss on my forehead. It felt nice, as the spot where his lips touched soon became warm and relaxing. To this day I can still feel it there every time I think about it. Because it all felt nice, a part of me still doubted that it was all real.

Was Dakota just being nice because he felt bad? Would he try to get rid of me the first chance he got after we got into a fight? Was he going to be just like Greg? All these questions and more would not leave me alone at all until a very familiar voice decided to visit me.

"Shandra, when you get older and if you want to know if a boy really really likes you, just take three breaths and only listen to the sound of his heart. If it sounds just like your heart, then the boy really does like you," whispered the voice. "I will, Grandma," whispered my five-year-old voice. I took the chance on my grandma's advice she gave me when I was little, and slide myself off of Dakota so I could listen to his heart beat. What I heard when his heart began to sync with mine, sounded like some sort of dreamy message that I could never forget.

If I had to convert it to a way I could put it on paper, I would have to put it like this, "*.. / .-- .. .-- .-- / .- .-- .-- .- .-- ... / .-- --- ...- . / -.- --- ..- --.- / -. --- / -- .- - .-. / .--- - /- .-. .-. .- ... --.- / -- .-- / -. .- .- .- .- - / -. .--. .- .- / -... .- --- ... --- -- .-.-*". Dakota was legit. He actually cared a lot about me, more so than my own family at times. To hold me to this truth, he wrapped his arm around me as we started to walk away from it all. As long as I was with him, what just happened didn't matter anymore. I was finally going to be free. But, the fantasies of what could be lying just beyond the horizon came to a stop, when we were at the

stairs, as Dakota signaled me to be quiet and pointed towards the front door.

Just outside, blocking our way out, stood officer Jerome and a woman wearing a long jacket and lanyard. I could tell right away she was a social worker, who came to ship me away like I was nothing more than an empty box on the back of a mail delivery truck. Dakota seemed just as worried about the social worker as I was, but seemed to be planning something out to avoid her altogether.

"Let me handle her," he whispered.

"Okay," I whispered. Dakota and I hurried down the stairs and went outside. Dakota leads the way so he would be the first to confront the social worker. As we got closer, we could hear officer Jerome stating his case to the social worker, trying to put things in our favor.

"I assure you that Frandsen is one of our most reliable resources for cases like these. He will make sure Shandra is kept safe," he said.

"I have heard of Mr. Frandsen," she replied, "His name pops up in many cases that involve supernatural materials. Normally, I wouldn't allow your suggestions to be put through the system but under the circumstances, I can allow it. But before anything moves further I must know something. Why is it that he takes such a personal approach to this particular case?"

Dakota and I made it out of the front door and stood just behind the social worker. To make himself look

more professional, Dakota tucked his arms behind his back.

"It is because I happen to go to school with Shandra," Dakota added. The social worker turned to face us, surprised at Dakota's gesture.

"It is nice to finally meet you," she said, "I have heard a lot about what you do."

"I hope that the word about me is good."

"Don't worry. Other than your behavior towards your father's case, you have a pretty good standing."

'What is she talking about?' I thought to myself.

"Well, wouldn't you be a little worried about people that didn't get angry considering what he did?" Dakota asked.

"I know, I know," she answered, "It was disgusting when the test results confirmed the allegations. But are you sure you want to handle this case? There are lots of foster homes that can take care of her."

"I am sure. But if I let you start treating her like cargo, you will lose her. Plus once foster care hasn't been linked to almost all heavy criminal offenders, then I would consider it a safe option."

'Wow, is this really happening?' I thought to myself.

"Understood," she said, "I see you are pretty locked in your decision. The notes in your profile about you being stubborn aren't an exaggeration. Be sure to take good care of her. But don't even think about trying anything, there will surveillance monitoring your house

24/7 and I will personally be coming in to inspect the premises."

"I understand, other than a couple busted door hinges that were there before I moved in you will find everything will be suitable. Now if you'll excuse me."

I started to follow Dakota to his car until he was stopped by the social worker when she put her hand on his shoulder.

"I hope you know what you're doing," she whispered to him. "Don't worry," he replied, "You would be surprised how much people begin to trust you when they realize that you can take away their nightmares inside of hiding from them."

Seeing that it was going to be impossible for her to convince Dakota in any other direction, she moved her hand away and let us pass. As we walked away from my house, it seemed like everyone was fixated on us. Dakota seemed to ignore them as we got to his car and he loaded my bag into the backseat. I tried to open the passenger side door, but the handle wouldn't budge. Dakota saw that I was having trouble and jerked the door open.

He stood holding while I crawled into the seat and laid back. All I wanted to do from that point forward, was sleep. Dakota's silence during the drive home showed that he knew and respected that I was simply tired from the day's events. I tried to catch a quick snooze during the ride, but flashes of the torture my mom and I felt for years kept popping into my mind.

It was like there was still a part of me that wanted to stay alert. Dakota must've seen that I was having problems as he set his hand on my leg and gently squeezed. Somehow, he was able to make the flashes disappear. He took his hand off of my leg so he could turn into the driveway of an old house just across the street from an old, foggy cemetery.

"So this is where you live?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's an alright place. You will like it here," he answered.

"I can already tell. But how is the bath?"

"Comfortable. It has been a while since I have last used it but it should be just perfect for you."

'Do you fit?' I joked to myself, "Great, I could definitely use one."

"I could only imagine. I'll get your bag for you."

We both got out of the car at the same time and walked up to the house. Dakota took the lead, after he grabbed my bag, and opened up the door. Inside the house, I could hear the sounds of bubbles popping inside of a fish tank. As I went inside, I looked around to just to get a feel for the place. I honestly expected the entire house to be covered with arcade games, toys, and posters with half-naked models. But I was actually greeted with something that looked like a home that was used as an office as well. Somehow, out of everything that happened, the first thing I noticed was a thirty-inch flat screen with several game consoles hooked into it.

"All of them are working if you want to hop on sometime," said Dakota when he noticed what I was looking at.

"Good," I smiled, "But can I ask you where the bathroom is? I really should take a bath."

"Yeah just head upstairs and go to the second door on the right. The bedroom is through the first door right at the top of the stairs," he answered.

"Thank you."

I grabbed my bag and made my way up the stairs. The staircase was narrow. Just at the top of the stairs was a room that looked like an office. The hallway immediately turned towards the left, making a u-turn. The door to the bathroom was cracked open just enough for me to see the sink and a large mirror that revealed the tub. As I went inside the room, I couldn't help but imagine Dakota laying down to take a bath with very little success.

'Yep,' I thought to myself, 'He is too big for it'

When I set my bag on the counter, by the sink, and started to get out a pair of pajamas with a teddy bear pattern I heard Dakota start moving in and out of the house, silently grunting as if he was carrying something heavy. When I turned on the faucet and took off my clothes, the sound of the rushing water drowned out the sounds from downstairs.

As I waited for the tub to fill, I took my hand and pressed it against every part of my body that felt like it was bruised. I could still feel the pain on my stomach,

to my arms, to my thighs, and to my breasts and nose. But instead of it feeling fresh, they all felt like they had been healing for weeks and were just on the verge of getting better. The warm water in the tub felt like it was trying to finish the healing process as it reached out its many arms to hold my body in. Feeling too relaxed to move, I used my toes to turn off the faucet and just laid there in the tub and ignored the entire world.

"You look comfy, mommy," whispered a very familiar little girl. Hearing Olivia's voice made me just to cover my chest. As splashes of water smacked against the tile floor, Olivia appeared standing right next to the tub.

"Sorry to scare you!" she shrieked.

"It's okay, honey," I told her, "It is nice to finally see you."

"I would've come sooner. But the person who helps me come back to see you and daddy said that I needed to stay away from the bad parts," Olivia explained.

"Oh really?" I asked, "Who is helping you?"

"Aunt Jessica. She is a special type of doctor in the future!"

"Jessica?" I whispered, "Does she have a sister named Brianna?"

"Yes, she does. But I only see her at night sometimes. No one else but Daddy acts like they can see her."

A loud thud against the wall, coming from downstairs, startled us both.

"Dakota is everything alright?" I yelled.

"Yeah," he answered, "I was just bringing in a few things from the car."

"Daddy was working last night," Olivia clarified.

"Okay," I shouted to Dakota. Dakota started to carry something up the stairs and into the room next to the bathroom. As soon as he would set something down, he would hurry back downstairs to grab something else. He made a total of four trips, going up and down the stairs before he settled down and started to unzip several bags.

"He has a lot of tools for his work," Olivia said.

"Yeah, I can tell," I sighed, "So why are you here?"

"Just to make sure you knew that you found Daddy," she answered before disappearing.

I laid back, somehow surprised at Olivia's confirmation of my suspicions. I thought finding out was going to be some long, perilous journey through time to solve an ultimate, mind-tearing question. But it was surprisingly easy to answer it.

"Dakota is the one," I said, *'But does that mean something else is going to happen?'*

Chapter 4

Ghosts to Hunt

After about ten minutes, I pulled the plug from the drain and hurried out of the tub. I wanted to talk to Dakota about what was going on between us. I needed to know about what he did for a living, how he healed me, how did he know to come rescue me... I needed to know everything. I quickly dried off and slipped on my pajamas before I hurried to find Dakota. I knew he was in the office by the bathroom, so I popped into the doorway to find him working on a computer.

"Hey, can we talk?" I asked him.

"Of course," he answered while gesturing towards a cot that was three feet from his desk, "Please, sit down."

"You aren't too busy with... whatever you are doing?" I asked.

"No, I have at least four hours to copy over so I have plenty of time."

'O...kay then,' I thought to myself as I took a seat on the cot, 'Alright, so how should I put this? Should I just be direct with him?'

I let out a sigh, which seemed to tell him how nervous I was since his voice once again made its way into my brain.

'It is okay to ask me anything,' I heard his voice say, 'I'll be honest with you.'

"What exactly is it that you do?" I finally asked him.

"Well my answer really depends on how much you understand," he replied.

"It's just that... I don't know. You are so kind, then I see you literally jump into my mind. You show me that you have your own business, then you end up helping cops in order to let me stay at your place. You have been so all over the place it is hard to keep track of everything. Like, how in the heck did you get the social worker to let me come with you?"

"I see," he giggled, "I guess it is fair I fill you in on everything."

As if to screw with me (which he was), Dakota lifted his hand and snapped his fingers to make it look like he triggered a screen saver to turn on. The screen itself showed three metallic letters, "P. R. F." moving around against a black background. I will admit it, he got me.

"I hope that you do," I told him while looking at the letters. Dakota tilted his head back to think about what he was going to say. I could see that his mind was jump-

ing to all sorts of places just to weave together some sort of story.

'Maybe you can start with how the social worker let you take me in without a fight?' I asked in my mind.

"You know, now that I think about it, I actually have no clue how it happened," he answered.

'Is he seriously reading my mind?' I asked, "Really? What about Officer Jerome? Wouldn't he know?"

"Why don't we give him a call?" he suggested, "He still might be at your house."

I nodded my head as Dakota quickly pulled out his smartphone started to scroll through his contact list. Once he found a spot that looked like it displayed Officer Jerome's name, he tapped his finger against his phone to call him and touched an icon to turn on speaker mode. The phone rang three times before someone answered.

"This is Officer 71349, Tracey Jerome," he announced.

"Jerry, it's me," Dakota said.

'Jerry?' I thought to myself, *'Why does he call him that?'*

"Dakota?" he asked, "Is everything okay with Shandra?"

"Everything is fine. I just needed to ask you something," Dakota answered. "Let me guess, you're wonderin' how I managed to convince the social worker to let you two stay together?"

Dakota and I simultaneously jumped when he guessed correctly.

"Actually," Dakota said, "Yes, that is what we were wondering."

"The social worker is my sister, Elisa. She owes me a few favors so I figured I cash them in. Don't say I haven't done anything for you."

"You have a sister in social services?" Dakota confusingly asked.

"Yep, and a twin brother who's a navy seal," he answered.

"Really? That explains a lot."

"I hope it does because I need to go. The scene is wrapping up."

"Alright, see ya."

"Oh, and by the way, my sister will come by your place tomorrow afternoon just to check in. And don't worry, the paperwork is already blacked out."

A clicking sound came from Dakota's phone to indicate Officer Jerome had hung up. Dakota pressed a button on the screen of his phone to lock it just before setting it down on his desk just before zoning out.

"Dakota... why did Jerry say 'the paperwork is already blacked out'?" I asked him before realizing he wasn't paying attention.

I had to start waving my hands in front of him to get him to respond.

"Hey Dakota, are you alright?" I asked.

"Yeah, sorry," he answered, "I sometimes zone out when my mind tries to read a bit more into what is happening,"

"Oh, okay. I was just asking what Jerry meant by, 'the paperwork is blacked out.' Does he mean no one will know I am here?"

"Only people that would be stupid enough to only look through the paperwork would be clueless about where you are at."

'What the heck does that mean?' I mentally screamed, "So how does that work?" I tried to dig more into how things were happening in order to keep from sounding rude.

"Before the file is even copied, parts of it are crossed out with a special black marker," Dakota answered, "In your case, only enough information will remain to hint that you were put into a safe house. Just to make it looks better there will also be information about the surveillance you and I are placed under. Only the cops that were at the scene and the those that help social services keep an eye on us will know you are here."

"So it's kinda like in the movies? Where a secret agent of the government looks through classified files?"

"Yeah, a little bit."

I started to look around the room, specifically at the weird gadgets and equipment he had scattered around the room. The things I recognized immediately were either cameras or something out of crime scene shows.

"So, if you don't mind me asking, how is it that you got involved with all of this?" I asked him.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what was it that happened that lead you to start ghost investigating, or whatever it is that you do. Or how you came to helping cops? Something like that doesn't come up out of nowhere."

"Yeah, I know what you mean and you are right. Somebody like me, hunting ghosts and chasing bad guys at the age of fifteen is unusual."

"So, how did it all start?"

Dakota took a few moments to think about his story. Once he took a deep breath he got started.

"Well, my interest in ghosts started when I was about nine. I was on a field trip to Boise to go visit the capitol building, a museum, and the old state pen. Well, when we went to the penitentiary something happened, something that I still have a hard time explaining. We went on this tour of the prison grounds just before a scavenger hunt, and right as the group passed the execution quarters, I started getting this weird feeling in my stomach," he said.

"Go on," I encouraged him. The look in his eyes screamed that he was starting to relive the tale. He swallowed before continuing on.

"It is hard to explain but it felt almost like this huge ball in my gut. It felt so heavy and almost nauseating to the point I had to drop to the floor. I tried shaking it off but had no luck. So I couldn't help but try to look

around to see what was making me feel like that. It was also at that point I realized the group left me behind. But it didn't matter once I looked inside the execution quarters, where they hung people. The noose was on display, and I swore I saw this shadow hanging from it. It wasn't something that was against the wall, but the shadow was an actual body. Within seconds, I started noticing an actual person forming inside the shadow being. I could tell it was a man being hung, and he was choking.

"Soon I started feeling out of breath like something was choking me. I go to blink my eyes, but as soon as they opened back up I saw myself in another room. My hands were tied behind my back and a rope was around my neck. Somehow I was able to take the place of the man who was being executed. I even felt the rope tightening around my neck as the floor beneath me disappeared."

My eyes quickly grew as Dakota continued to tell his story. The details behind it were so unreal it was like he was from a completely different planet. Was this how life was going to be with him?

"Keep going," I pushed.

"It took some time before I went out. I was just hanging there, dangling a fish on a hook, being choked out in a time before I was even born. When I finally started to black out was when I popped back into my own body, coming off of one hell of an adrenaline high. I started bugging out, immediately thinking that

someone was trying to commit suicide or something. I started screaming, trying to stop something that technically wasn't even happening. No one would believe me when I told them, not even people in my own family. It took me two years to find out who it was I saw," he added.

"Who was it that you saw?" I asked him.

"His name was Raymond Snowden. And for some reason, he wanted me to see something that day. At least that is what I made myself to believe just to make sense of it. I've always wanted to go back, just to see if I could see it happen again."

"Why?"

"A killer took the time to show me something, wouldn't you be a little curious, still scared obviously but curious about why?"

"Yeah, I... guess," I answered.

"He was executed for stabbing a woman to death, maybe there was something in me that he saw."

"That is scary. But that doesn't explain everything else," I said.

"I know and I apologize," he replied, "I have a hard time explaining these details to people because there are about three different points that I could say were the influence behind how I got started. But they happened so long ago I barely remember them, other than the stories I have been told."

"So what does that mean? Are you some sort of angel? Demon? God? Superhero? What?"

Dakota let out a slight chuckle at my seemingly random guess. "Actually the closest would be an unsung superhero of sorts, to be honest," he joked.

"Well tell me. You have caught my interest."

"In short, me working with the police and you healing that fast, among many other things, are the result of a time when I was murdered at the age of four. After a family argument of sorts, I was stabbed in the back of the neck. I don't remember much of what happened up to that point or who did it. All I do remember was being granted two alter-egos that brought me back to life and would help me get out of that situation. One of which helped me heal you when we kissed. The other likes to hunt down criminals and other things masked by the night and fight them off in every way possible if needed."

"What else can you do?"

"Just about anything, really. Come here I will show you."

Dakota lead me to a window that faced the street. It had a direct view of the foggy graveyard. Dakota took a moment to slide open the window and stuck his hand out.

"Fog can be quite creepy when it settles like that, don't you agree?" he asked.

'What does he mean?' I wondered.

His eyes closed as he took a deep breath. The very moment he exhaled, a wind gust came out of nowhere and cleared up the fog.

"How did you do that?" I asked him.

"The same way I can do this," he answered while cupping his hand together. In his hands, a bright red rose bloomed seemingly right through his palms.

"I can make the most amazing things happen, in the purest of ways, with nothing more than a thought mixed with love," he added, "Some say the source of my abilities were responsible for creation itself."

"That is amazing," I smiled. Dakota smiled as he became quiet. He stared directly into my eyes. The look I saw in his eyes was the same way I would catch him looking at the stars. I couldn't help but smile and blush.

"This is for you," he said handing me the rose.

"But Dakota, we haven't even gone on our first date yet," I told him. I always felt that flowers should wait until like the very first moments of the first date, just to make a good impression. Guys that pulled them out before then just seemed a bit desperate.

"Well," he sighed, "Maybe when my paycheck comes in on Friday we can fix that."

I carefully reached for the rose from Dakota's hand, just trying to avoid any thorns. But instead of just taking the rose, I felt like reaching my arms around him one more time. Each time I hugged him, my hands could barely touch each other.

"So what is it that you do for a living?" I asked him, "Other than the whole paranormal thing." I knew that the ghost hunters on television had other jobs since

they never made anyone pay for them to come over. I thought that it would be the same for Dakota, especially since he didn't have any camera crews around him.

"I actually work several jobs," he answered, "I do a lot of graphic design, writing, and some voice over work. I do also get an occasional check from the city whenever I help the police with a case, but that is more of an occasional bonus."

"Really? How the heck did you get started on that living by yourself?"

"In short, I made a lot of good impressions at a young age and managed to work a few things out. I did everything I could to separate myself from my parents."

'Huh? What does he mean?' I asked myself. I was caught off guard when Dakota said he needed to separate himself from his parents. I honestly thought that no one could have had a worse family situation than my own. Maybe it was selfish, but at the time it didn't really add up.

"Why though?" I asked him while letting him go.

"I'll show you," he answered.

Dakota moved back to his computer and went on-line. I watched as he typed in the website for a news radio station in the area and started searching through several articles. He stopped at one titled, "Local Man arrested for Sexual Assault to a Minor," and pulled up

the information. He moved his body to the side so I could get a better look.

"I have heard about him," I said, "But what does that have to do with you?"

Dakota looked like he was embarrassed about the answer, and was afraid of what I would have to say. Honestly, after what he saw happened to me, I thought he would be more open about his own demons. But it looked like he was still fighting them, or maybe he was afraid of scaring me off once I knew the truth about him.

"That man... is my father," he answered slowly, "And the child he hurt was my sister. The state put all of the kids he had with my stepmom into foster care."

'What? He... is just like me!' I screamed in my mind. I thought I was alone with these types of demons, but Dakota was obviously dealing with ones much like my own. Was that why he came to me? Was that how he knew what would've happened if he let the social worker take me? Seeing that he was still fighting his battle, I had to go up and hug him to try to make him feel better.

"Did they at least let you visit the kids?" I asked him.

"No," he answered as tears started to form in his eyes, "They didn't actually."

"Why? You're their brother. You should be allowed to see them."

"I know and I agree. But the system started to treat me like I was my father so they made sure I never was seen or heard from them."

"Why? You didn't do anything, right?"

"In their eyes, I did something much worse," he said, "I looked them right in the eye and told them that if my father ever came near me, I would kill him."

'Oh my god, he has the voices too,' I said mentally.

Hearing Dakota speak in such a way made me somewhat afraid of him. I could just see the rage he held inside that was waiting to come out. My fear... was that I would accidentally do something to set it free. But I couldn't let myself be afraid, he was the one to take me from my own hell hole, I at least owed him the same favor.

"You don't mean it did you? You just said it out of anger?" I asked him.

"I did mean it. I still do. Regardless of the fact that he was my father, he still hurt someone I cared about. He hurt his own daughter. No matter what happened to me, killing him seemed like the best option for everybody," he answered, "Yes I was angry. I was in a near rage that no one understood, not even people in my family. My own sister, the one who came forward about what my father was doing, used the fact I threatened our own father to torment me. That honestly aggravated me beyond belief.

"Yet no one seemed to realize my brothers and sisters being taken into foster care on Christmas Day was

the part that hurt the worse. I never even had the chance to meet my youngest sister who was about six months old at the time. My mother's side started saying that I shouldn't care about it, which is why I started doing as many jobs I could get my hands on in order to move out of the house. Hell, the only reason I stayed in Idaho was so I could be near my grandfather who is battling cancer."

'So that he why he was the one to help me,' I said while analyzing what he said, 'But what if none of that ever happened? Would he still come to help me? Would he even be able to?'

Every, "What if" I could think of in the moment was pointless. It was obvious that the only reason he was around to help me because he was part of a situation that was a lot like mine.

"But I must admit that in a way I am somewhat glad this all happened. Otherwise, I probably wouldn't have been able to help you. If my family had their way, I would not be able to come around when I did. If something were to happen to you, I just don't know," he said quietly.

"What would you have done? We hardly know each other. You probably wouldn't pay much attention to it. Nobody would," I said.

"That is where you are wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"Shandra, I've already shown you some of the things I could do. Maybe what happened with my siblings was

part of the reason they became stronger. I don't know," he answered, "But I think the reason we came together was that something meant for us to meet one way or another."

An idea popped into his head. He jumped out of his chair and hurried into the hallway, using his height to stretch his arms and press against the ceiling. As he moved forward, part of the ceiling quickly bounced open and a rope fell out that dangled from it. Dakota pulled on the rope to bring down a ladder which leads to a secret attic.

"Would you like to see more?" he asked. "Sure," I answered, "But what is up there?"

"I guess one could say that this is where my way of prayer becomes answered. Or perhaps the most useful library in the area."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on," he jerked his head in the direction of the attic, "I promise not to start acting like a religious extremist. People like that irritate me."

"Alright..." I was a bit confused about where Dakota was going with all of this, but I was interested to see what else he had to show off. So I slowly went up the ladder to check out what was upstairs. I guess you could say I was expecting the cliché cobwebs and dusty boxes, but what I saw up there was amazing. I could see several different paintings, shelved filled with books, and several bowls filled with a bunch of necklaces with different designs. In the middle of the room stood a

wooden altar. Dakota followed closely behind me as the ladder creaked under his weight.

"This is my own personal library for the supernatural. Anything from ghosts, to monsters, to supernatural powers. Ever since I met Olivia, I've been trying to find something that explains how it could be possible..." he said, "Shandra, is everything alright?" My attention was captured by a painting that was to the north side of the house. It looked like it depicted several women dressed in golden armor, armed with spears and swords. They all had golden wings but were flying on some sort of objects that resembled horses. Something about that painting looked awfully familiar.

"Yeah, it's just... I think I recognize this painting," she answered.

"Maybe you have seen it in a magazine," he suggested.

"No, it's not that," I said, "I think I am IN this painting."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"That woman in the painting, the one in the far back, is me!"

One of the women looked an awful lot like me. It was almost like staring at a picture of myself posing in a faceless image board.

"What do you know about this painting?" I asked Dakota.

"Not much. The story goes that this painting was found in a German museum's old archives, but they all

believed it was fake despite it being about two-hundred years old. So they simply sold it off to a distant cousin of mine who brought it to me when he started to develop a theory on time travel."

"Time travel? Where does he get that idea?"

"Well just take a closer look at the grounds below. The Warriors are actually fighting with relatively modern guns. In fact, some of them look like they are in jungle camouflage. Which may not seem weird until you look closely."

"How so?" Dakota went to a table that was next to the altar and grabbed a magnifying glass. He placed it over a warrior that was standing in the brightest spot on the ground.

"Notice how the pattern looks almost pixelated?" he asked. "Yeah, I see what you are getting at. It looks like army camouflage. But how is that possible?"

"Well, the time travel theory does kinda stand. But truthfully, that theory doesn't click very well with me."

"How so?"

"Well first off, this is depicting beings from Norse mythology overseeing a relatively modern battlefield. It is hard to tell because of the way the piece aged, but the warriors actually use what look like modern rifles. Even if the Valkyries were real, it would be very odd. There is an old story that tells that the Pagan gods left because the majority of the human population converted to Christianity. So assuming that is true to some

extent, why would they be back?" he asked, "Huh... that is interesting."

"Well maybe something will or did happen to make them come back," I suggested, "Because I know it sounds crazy but I swear that Valkyrie is me!"

"I can see why you would think that, but I just noticed something. And if my eyes aren't just playing tricks on me, and what you are saying is, in fact, the truth, we might actually be a big part of it."

Dakota reached out and pointed to the right bottom corner of a painting, where a faint symbol could be seen. It looked slightly distorted, probably to form itself to the ground, but it looked like some sort of sideways eye with something that looked like a hurricane in the place of the pupil. The eye was enclosed in a large circle, making it look like some sort of seal.

"What is that?" I asked Dakota.

"It may just be a coincidence, but that looks an awful lot like the symbol I designed for my ghost hunts. And..." he said, "Now that I am looking at it there looks like there are people within the symbol."

Dakota and I both looked closer at the symbol and found that there was someone standing inside of it. In fact, there were three people, all looking nearly identical. They all were dressed in a long coat and appeared to be wearing fedora-like hats. The only difference between the three, other than their poses, were the colors of their clothing. One was in all black. The second one, standing in the middle of the three, was dressed in a

shiny gray colored uniform. The third was in all white. They each seemed to be important to the other, like they were close brothers.

I swear I could see them guarding people, but that part of the painting was too dark to make out many details. But lying in a pool of blood, next to the three men, was another man that looked surprisingly familiar.

"Hey," I said poking Dakota on the shoulder, "Does that dead guy lying next to the symbol look familiar?"

"Huh, that actually looks a bit like my buddy Marcus," he answered.

"I know this sounds weird, maybe not to you, but is there a chance that I could be that Valkyrie?"

"Maybe. The Norse believed that our souls could be reincarnated. Maybe you are one of the incarnated versions of her soul."

"I don't know," I said starting to feel overwhelmed, "Is there a way to check?"

Dakota put his finger and thumb against his chin as he thought about my question. I could see in his eyes that he was putting something together.

"There are a few ways that it can be done," he said, "But some are rather complex if you don't know what you are doing."

"Really?" I asked, "Can I try one?"

"Yes of course," he said, "I think there might be one way, but it might not let you go that far back."

"What do you mean?" Dakota walked over to the shelves full of books and began running his fingers

across the rows. As soon as he came to one he was looking for, I could hear a loud thud come from his hand.

"Astral Projection," he said.

'Okay, now this is getting weird,' I thought, "I didn't think that was real."

"It is very real, otherwise the military wouldn't have tried to experiment with it back in the seventies."

"Tried? Did something go wrong?"

"In their eyes, yes. The project got shut down back in 1995 because of very few results. There were successful attempts but those who managed to do it burnt out."

"Burnt out?!" I said, "What happened to them?"

"The military didn't have enough patience to allow its subjects to properly develop, so many of them simply became too exhausted. Almost like getting sore after a rough first day at the gym."

I started to rub my arm when he mentioned gym. Despite me being surprisingly skinny, I hardly ever worked out.

"If it hurts I don't think I want to do it," I joked.

"Don't worry," he said, "I won't put you through that. You might get a bit of a headache at most but it usually goes away in a couple minutes."

"Okay, I am going to trust you." Dakota took a few moments to grab out a book and start skimming through it. Once he found a page, he quickly read the details to himself before continuing to talk to me.

"Here," he said, "I think I may have a way we can put you under without having any problems."

"Put me under? You need drugs in order to do it?" I asked him.

"No, that was where the government went wrong. The only drugs we use are what we are born with. We just need to adjust the levels to get you in the right state."

"What state?"

"The only way we can do this without it hurting you. Serenity."

'Serenity? How the heck is I supposed to feel that way after what happened today?' I thought to myself.

"Do you still want to do this?" he asked.

"I am too curious not to try," I answered.

"That is all I needed to know." Dakota slid the book back into the empty slot then walked over to me. He looked like he was still trying to decipher something before he said anything else to me.

"So what do we need to do?" I asked him.

"Well, why don't you just find a place comfortable to rest downstairs," he said, "I am going to grab something that will help set your mind at ease."

"Cool. I am getting a bit tired."

Following Dakota's directions, I slowly went down the ladder to go downstairs. The first place that came to mind to get comfortable at was in his bedroom. A Viking-sized guy like Dakota must've had a queen sized

mattress at least. Sure enough, I found a large king size and immediately tucked myself underneath the sheets.

As I crawled underneath the sheets, I noticed a blue and white blanket on his bed that just had a different feel to it. No, not the feeling from the fabric. The blanket itself felt like it was a gift from someone important. I didn't notice any special about the pattern, other than it was a picture of a grizzly bear standing on a mountainside on both sides. I was too tired to really care, and despite it being only five in the afternoon, I went straight to sleep.

As I was drifting off, and my body quickly became numb, I could hear Dakota walk into the room. He walked over to each window to close the curtains, making the room darker. The metal loops on the second curtain were loud enough to slightly pull me out of sleeping mode.

"What is going on?" I moaned. Dakota crouched down to meet me... somewhat at my eye level. As my eyes were falling asleep themselves, they made Dakota look blurry.

"It's alright," he answered, "I am just getting it dark for you."

"Oh thank you. Sorry about falling asleep."

"Don't be. Dreams can sometimes help look into the past. Maybe with the thought of looking into your past life, your dreams will do all of the work for us."

"Kinda like how sometimes dreams show the future?"

"In a way, yes. It takes much more in order to go back in time, but considering what you have been through you will be able to..." That is all I remember hearing. I fell right back asleep as Dakota was talking. But part of me was still awake just enough to feel Dakota's lips as he kissed the back of my hand. He had slowly lifted it off of the bed in order to do it, but as he was setting it back down I pulled my hand next to my face so the spot he kissed would lay right against my cheek.

After that, I am pretty sure I stayed smiling while I was asleep. I don't remember any major dreams taking place that night, except for one. I remember opening my eyes and finding myself in a strange room. The walls looked like they were made of nothing but sand. I tried to get up, but my arms and legs were chained to the bed. I started to become more aware of my surroundings, especially my clothes. I was dressed in nothing but a black dress-type thing. But what I was wearing didn't matter as strange shadows started to surround me.

They each looked to be twelve feet tall. At first, they were silent. Then they each started mocking me as they flew around me. I could see faces made out of oozing blood appear all over their bodies. I screamed to the top of my lungs, but I couldn't make a sound. It seemed like I was screaming for hours before something happened. A loud roar and a quickly growing earthquake emerged out of nowhere. Through the shadows, I saw

two people appear. One was a large man who looked ready to tear apart an army, the other was a concerned little girl.

"Daddy! Help Mommy!" the child screamed. The man let out one final roar, which caused the shadows to quickly stir together above me. As the man quickly approached me, the shadows beings merged into one tiny pebble which dropped to my chest. Before the man could notice anything, the dark pebble sank into my skin, burning a path into it. My whole body felt like it was set on fire and started to shake like I was about to die. The dress I was wearing was sliding off my body, revealing that nothing was underneath. The man didn't seem to care as he ran up to me. It felt like he was trying to get me to calm down but I couldn't pay any attention to him.

"Shandra!" he shouted, "Shandra, wake up!"

"Oh my god, Dakota!" I screamed.

The chains I was held in finally disappeared, allowing me to jump up and reach my arms around Dakota. My entire body started to shiver.

"It's okay," he said, "It was nothing more than a dream."

"No, it wasn't. It was real. It was too real. Please don't go!" I cried.

I tightened my arms around him so he couldn't. But both of us were very tired, being it was the middle of the night, so we slowly fell into bed together. Somehow

my head laid against his surprisingly soft chest. It felt like I was a little kid hugging a gigantic teddy bear.

"I won't ever go," he whispered, "I will always be around when you need me."

"What if something happens to you?" I asked.

"Shandra, if you ever need me and I am not there, look to the stars. My mind has always been there, so it is only a matter of time before my body decides to join."

I gave him a slight smile before slowly drifting further into sleep. To help me relax, Dakota started to use his index finger to massage my temple by drawing a heart over and over again. Soon, I began to feel a tiny body lying between us.

"Goodnight," Olivia whispered.

"Good night," Dakota and I said in unison.

From that moment on, I remember nothing but the image of the three of us just laying together. A sense of family. This was my new life, one that I didn't have to worry about fighting. One I didn't have to worry about whether or not I was going to make it through the night. Even though I had just met Dakota, I trusted him more than anyone else. The next morning, Dakota and I both woke up at the same time. He started to look around the room like he was trying to remember what happened the night before.

"Morning, Dakota," I moaned.

"Morning. How did you sleep?" he asked.

"Better after you came in."

"Good. I am glad I could help." I opened up my eyes further to get a better look at him. Since I was just waking up, my vision was still a little blurry, but it was finally able to adjust itself. I started to wonder about how something like the dream we both had that night was possible.

"So what happened last night?" I asked him.

"What do you remember?"

"Not much. I remember getting trapped by these weird shadows. Then after a little girl cried out, you came in and the shadows disappeared."

"That's weird. I remember seeing all of that."

"Weird for you? That is a little ironic coming from someone like you."

"Yeah. But a lot of things have been changing lately so anything is possible."

"So what does it mean?"

"Usually a dream like that means something important is coming."

"Like our daughter?"

Dakota's eyes nearly jumped out of his head. Apparently, he hadn't quite put together that the little girl that was just laying in bed with us was indeed our little girl.

"Do you think she had anything to do with it?" I asked him.

"For the dream?" he asked, "No, but I do think she is a big part of it. Plus, why would a six-year-old try to

show us something that looked like it was taking place in Egypt."

"This is all too confusing. First, she saves my life, but she never tells me why she did it."

"Really? Is that how you met her?"

"I don't really want to talk about it right now."

"I get it. But, if it does make things easier, she did save me as well..." Surprise, surprise, my growling stomach decided to interrupt Dakota. I squeezed my eyes shut while my cheeks turned bright red as we both laughed. I was so embarrassed. Plus my high pitched laughter, many people said sounded like a baby, made me even more embarrassed.

"I am so sorry," I said.

"Don't be," Dakota replied between laughs, "How about I go make us some breakfast and then we will talk about it?"

"Yeah, I would like that. What is on the menu?"

"How about some pancakes?"

"I'd love some."

"Cool. Then how about I bring it back up so you and I can have breakfast in bed?"

"I'd like that."

Dakota leaned forward to give me a kiss just before getting out of bed. Just to thank him for breakfast, I snuck in one small peck on his lips. Right as he got up, he made just enough of a bounce to launch me a couple inches into the air. To be honest, it was kinda fun. That, and Dakota doing some sort of goofy dance as

he went down the stairs was enough to make me giggle uncontrollably. I thought I heard another girl laughing in the room as well, but I simply brushed it off. For the ten minutes Dakota was downstairs, sorting through pots and pan while he was cooking, I simply laid back on the bed and let the smell of pancakes torture me.

There were times while he was cooking I could've sworn he was talking to someone else but I didn't pay much attention to it. It was just nice to not be ordered around by some asshole trying to be a drill sergeant just to get breakfast. No offense to military families, but I had my reasons. Somehow, right as thoughts of Greg started to creep their way back into my mind, Dakota appeared at the door with a tray. The tray held a plate with a huge stack of pancakes and two glasses of orange juice.

"Pancakes and some orange juice, my lady," he announced using an English butler voice.

I sat up impressed at the gesture. Dakota's impersonation was spot on, and the pancakes looked fluffier than anyone else's batch.

"Oh, why thank you, my dear!" I replied in an English accent. Dakota smiled and laughed at my impersonation. I loved that I was able to get him to laugh. It meant that he actually enjoyed my company, rather than pretend like other guys. And also unlike other guys, Dakota had cooked a very delicious smelling of pancakes that couldn't have come quicker. As soon as he set the tray down; I swiped half the stack, a fork,

and a plate in one swoop of my arms and started eating. I must've caught Dakota a bit by surprise.

"Looks like you have quite an appetite," he joked, "Are they good at least?" I swallowed the large chunks of pancake I had in my mouth before talking.

"Yes, these are delicious!" I said.

"Good."

"So are you ready to talk about how you met Olivia?" "Yeah, just give me a sec." I held up my index finger to get Dakota to give me a moment to just swallow. When I let my hand drop, I was ready to talk... surprisingly.

"Well, it started when my mom met my dad after he got back from the war just, after I turned thirteen," I sighed, "He got really violent with me and my mom. I started blaming myself for everything that would happen and I just had enough."

"Let me guess," he said, "You tried to hang yourself but something made you stop before you'd do it."

"Yeah! Then this bright blue light surrounded me when this man appeared. After he spoke to me, he simply stepped aside to show me that someone was wanting to see me. That was when I saw Olivia for the first time. Ever since then I see her at the most random times, but lately, I have been seeing her around you."

"That pretty much describes how I met her."

"Yeah well until recently she has been freaking me out! Every time I tried asking her about where she is from she either giggled or would disappear."

Sure enough, the evil little shit starts laughing when we started to talk about her. Olivia sounded like she was in the room with us at the time, but I couldn't see her.

"See what I mean?" I said.

"Yeah I see," Dakota smiled, "Good to know now that our child is slightly evil."

'But how does she fit into all of this?' I asked myself.

"Honestly, I don't think the answer to that has yet to make itself known," Dakota answered while placing his hand on my shoulder and locking his eyes onto mine, "But it is obvious whatever is coming needed her to bring us together. Since that has happened we will be able to find out what is going on."

"You think?"

"Yes. Whatever happens, we will take it on together."

I set my fork down and set my hand on top of his.

"I know," I whispered, "But can we change the subject? This all is getting to be a bit overwhelming."

"Sure thing," he said, "Is there anything you want to do today?"

"Well, there is this movie I've been waiting to see, but it doesn't come out until Thursday," I answered.

"Oh? Which one?"

"I think it is called 'Death is Not the End.' I saw the previews for it a couple days ago and thought it looked pretty good. But since it is more of a chick movie, it is okay if you don't want to see it with me."

Dakota smiled from ear to ear, like he was hiding a big secret from me. Whatever that secret was almost looked like it was going to spill each time he took a bite of his pancakes.

"Oh, I think I'll join you," he said

"Alright, cool! But what is with that look on your face?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing really," he answered, "I may have had a hand in helping make the movie."

My eyes jumped. Yet another wonderful surprise fact about Dakota was unfolding.

"How so?" I asked.

"I actually wrote the original screenplay as part of a contest," he answered.

"Really?"

"Yeah, of course, the script was altered a bit since the studio took over, " he said, "But the movie is still my baby."

"Wow, Dakota, that is really cool!"

"It's nothing," he said, "I honestly didn't think it was going to go very far."

"Well you should be proud it did, that is something few people get to do!"

"I know, plus I should consider it a blessing since..."

Three knocks on the front door downstairs interrupted Dakota before he could finish. We both looked at his alarm clock to see that it was only "8:24" in the morning.

'Who could that be?' I asked myself mentally.

'Probably the social worker from yesterday,' Dakota telepathically answered, "I'll go see."

"I'll be honest, you doing that is freaking me out," I said as he started to walk away.

Dakota started going down the stairs but turned his head to speak.

"Well, just to warn you now, it is only going to get worse the longer we are together," he laughed.

'That is going to be interesting.'

I listened as Dakota went to answer the door. I could barely hear what he was saying, but by the sound of him laughing, it was all going well.

"So Mrs. Rose, why don't you come on upstairs? Shandra and I were just enjoying a little breakfast in bed," he said.

"Alright. Again I am sorry for stopping in so early. I have so many places I need to check in today so I'd thought I'd get you two out of the way," Elisa said.

"Oh, it is alright! Like I said she had a bit of a rough night but it was taken care of."

"Well good. I figured that she might have a rough start to things considering what happened."

I saw Dakota and the social worker appear at the top of the stairs. They both seemed awfully calm under the circumstances. I was actually caught off guard at the fact the social worker, who showed up at my house, didn't have any sort of clipboard or anything.

"Hello, Shandra," Mrs. Rose said, "How are you feeling today?"

"A little better, now that I've eaten a bit," I answered.

"Good," she turned her head to Dakota, "Can you give us a minute?"

"Sure thing," he answered. He then turned to face me and smiled, *'I'll be downstairs doing... something, if you need me.'*

I smiled and said, *'Okay.'*

Dakota started to walk downstairs as Mrs. Rose came into the bedroom and shut the door. My heart started to race a bit when she did that. I started to feel short of breath. My body was starting to lock itself up like it was sensing another attack from Greg.

"It is okay, Shandra, I just wanted to keep this conversation between us," Mrs. Rose explained, "Now please be honest, has Dakota been treating you well?"

"Well, yeah. Last night he came to check on me after I was having a nightmare, and this morning he made us breakfast."

"The nightmare, did it happen to look like it was in Egypt by any chance?"

'WHAT THE HELL?!' I mentally screamed. My eyes grew inside my head. How in the HELL did she know that? "How did you know that?" I asked her.

"Well... let's just say that me coming here is more of a favor to an old friend of mine rather than being a scheduled visit from a social worker."

"What do you mean?"

"Your father, and I mean your real father Ronald, wanted me to keep an eye out for you should anything happen to him."

My jaw dropped as tears began to build up in my eyes. "You... you knew my dad?"

"Yep. We were in the same unit over in Iraq. He and I were actually good friends."

"Well, what can you tell me about him?"

"Only the most important thing, that he loved you so much he literally had a dream that told him you were going to be in some sort of danger a week before he died."

"What kind of dream?"

"Well," she said taking a seat on the bed, "It is kinda hard to explain."

"Tell me, please," I pleaded, "I need to know."

Mrs. Rose took a deep breath and began telling the story. "Your dad and I were in charge of monitoring radar systems around the base in case of any surprise attacks. Your dad was my superior and my trainer. He and I got along fairly well, at least I would think we did for a good while," she said.

"Did something happen?" I asked her.

"Yeah, something did happen," she answered, "I'm not exactly sure what though."

"Tell me!"

"Alright, alright," she said, "Anyway every now and then your father would personally investigate any strange readings our gear picked up. Most of the time,

it was minor environmental factors that could happen at any time. A bird carrying a piece of metal, maybe a civilian aircraft that went off course, heck there was a time when a solar flare messed up a few lines."

"But I thought that those were supposed to be built a certain way to prevent that?"

"They are, but human error can sometimes miss certain details. Anyway, about two months before your dad was killed those weird readings started to happen more frequently, too frequently to brush off. So your father would actually go and investigate the cause without a word to the rest of us. Every time he would go, there was always a certain woman that followed him.

"No one knew much about her since she didn't talk much. We knew that her last name was Grey, but truth be told it also became a bit of a nickname for her. Her skin was this palish gray color all the time. And her eyes looked like she was a real life Japanese anime character because they were so big.

"Anyway, whenever they came back they looked so stressed out they became walking skeletons. Your father looked the worse, while Grey just looked like she was hungry. Eventually, he started acting like he was hallucinating, and at night the entire base could hear him scream in his sleep. We all got very worried, and many of us tried to reach a handout, but our higher-ups kept getting in the way to keep everyone silent. After this had gone on for a while, about a week before his

last operation, he opened up to me about a recurring dream that was the reason behind his night terrors."

"Was it about me?"

"Yes, it was," she answered, "He told me that just about every time he closed his eyes he would see the same two images over and over again. In his words, the first image he saw was you chained up like a piece of meat, wearing nothing but a black cloth, and covered in bruises and blood and broken bones. Now that I think about it, you probably looked like what you did yesterday. He would then say that a bolt of bright blue lightning would appear out of nowhere, striking you. You would then be wrapped up in some sort of red cocoon that would slowly turn gold. And as you would come out, you changed into something extraordinary."

"What?"

"He couldn't say. But all of the sudden he would see you as a strong, young, beautiful woman dressed in golden armor. You would draw out your sword and golden wings would come out of your back. And instead of you being alone, the image of three men appeared right at your side. He said that the three men looked exactly alike except the clothes they were wearing were different colors. One was in all black. One was in shiny silver. And the third one was in all white. They each looked like they were ready to fight by your side."

"What could that mean?"

"I'm not sure, to be honest, but your father was convinced that it meant something horrible was going to

happen to you and because of it, you would become something stronger when someone came to help you."

"Do you think, that the three men, are Dakota?"

"Actually, yes. Perhaps it was also a reflection of different sides to him. You see Dakota's past left him with a mild case of dissociative identity disorder. When he was younger, he use to claim there were at least six people living inside him but three that always remained dominant. From his files, these three seemed to work together; one the healer and protector, one that was a monster, and the third being a mediator between the two.

"But I'm getting too off course. Your dad knew that something was going to happen hat is why your dad wanted me to keep my eyes on you in case he wasn't around anymore."

"What did happen to him?"

"Well, the official report says he died in an explosion, but the truth is a lot of us in our unit aren't buying it. I can't say much about it, but there was a lot that doesn't add up. That and Grey disappeared around the same time with no paper trail of her even being born."

"So you're saying... my dad... he's alive?"

"Maybe, and into something deep if he is. I know this is a lot to take in, and don't be afraid to talk to Dakota about this. Now, with everything that happens, I think he going to be a big part of your life no matter what happens."

'Oh you have no idea,' I said to myself.

Mrs. Rose took a second to grab out her phone and check the time. She then pulled out a business card from her coat and handed it over to me.

"But just in case you feel that there is something you can't talk with him about, anything at all, you go ahead and give me a call," she said. I took the card and said, "Okay, thanks."

"No problem, anyway I should get going. I'll be back in about a week to check up on things."

"How is my mom doing?"

"She is doing alright. She didn't take any major injuries. But before you can go back home, she will need to get some help to clean up the place."

"Will I at least get to talk to her?"

"She will probably give you a call later tonight. I told her it was probably best to give you some time to relax and wrap your head around everything. And that you would be kept in a safe place until further notice, given the circumstances."

"I just don't want anything like it to happen again."

"Don't worry, honey, Dakota's got a way of maying problems go away. To be honest, I know I probably shouldn't be putting it this way, but that big goofball won't allow else happen to you or die trying," she said, "There are unseen forces watching over both of you."

"I thought you were slapping 24/7 surveillance on Dakota?"

"It was just a little something to make sure he keeps his act together," she grinned, "He may have abilities and be classy about it but he's still a teenage boy."

"Got it."

Mrs. Rose stood up and started to leave the room. I set the empty tray aside and followed her as she went downstairs. She didn't say a word until she found Dakota working on the computer.

"Well Mr. Frandsen, it looks like everything checks out. I will be back in a week just to check up on you two," she said just before walking out the door.

"Well alright," Dakota said, "See you."

Dakota got off of his computer to close the door behind Mrs. Rose. Once he turned the locks, he turned to face me with a smile but it turned sour once he saw that something was on my mind.

"Hey," he said, "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," I answered, "Just heard something I'd never thought could be possible."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"Okay," he replied. Dakota didn't take the conversation any further. I could tell that he was just wanting to give me my space, but I wanted to spill this new secret to him so badly. So as he started to go upstairs, my mind decided to blow the whistle.

'Elisa just said that there is a chance my real father is still alive,' I screamed.

Dakota jerked his head towards me and replied, *'What do you mean?'*

"She was telling me that a bunch of people, think my real dad didn't die over in Iraq."

Dakota and I both sat down on the couch and talked for what seemed like hours about what Mrs. Rose told me about my father. He suggested several ideas on what could be going on if any truth was behind the idea. It seemed like he was offering twisted versions of conspiracy movies at the time, but I knew he was just trying to help out. But in the end, there was something he said that captured it perfectly.

"Honestly Shandra, it looks like you have your own ghosts to hunt now," he said.

"Yeah, no kidding," I giggled, "But does it get any easier?"

"From my experience, it all depends on what happens. At one point it could look like you are close to the answer, only to find even bigger questions that would be harder to crack. Or you may find one small detail that was overlooked and causes the everything you know to crumble. Or you may just find a combination of the two," he answered.

"So in short, it doesn't?"

"Pretty much, but that is just the nature of the beast. Something that a lot of people don't get, is that the search for answers often lasts longer than the lives of those who brought up the questions. And because

of that, they assume that everything they know is all that they need."

"Yeah, I guess so. I just wish there was some way to make just thinking about this easier."

"Well, you could always try to do what I do when I get writer's block. Just push the problem to the back of your mind and let it do its own thing for a while."

"What do you mean?"

"Whenever I get writer's block, I just jump to something else to help get my mind off of it. Then, after a while, I am able to jump right back in."

"Is there anything you suggest?"

"How about I take you out to lunch? Anything you are in the mood for, I'll take you there. We can just talk about anything else, and we will see if anything comes up."

"Sounds good. There is this one deli place that has been around for a while I've always wanted to try. But it is a bit outside of town."

"You mean that one place just off the highway, past the church?"

"Yeah, you know it?" "I should, considering I knew the owners since I was seven. They're old family friends. They got some good stuff."

"Oh! Well, cool! Then I guess it's a date! Is there anything you can't do?"

Chapter 5

Back to School

Dakota smiled as I excitedly ran back up the stairs and started to get ready for our date. I quickly got in and out of the shower just so Dakota could get himself ready. Apparently, in the time that I was taking a shower and getting changed, Dakota decided to start packing up the car with a few supplies in order to give me one more surprise. I heard him shuffling around the house, grabbing things, so naturally, I had to ask him what was going on. He just kept saying that it was a surprise for later. Sure enough, he did have a surprise for me and was surprisingly good about keeping it from me until last minute.

After we got the food, and Dakota introduced me to the deli owners, he had me stash our food in a cooler that was in the trunk of his car (somehow my mind didn't register the cooler as a hint). Then he took me on a twenty-minute drive to a large lake out in the middle of nowhere. There were boat docks and RV parking

spots, but the place was deserted as far as we could tell. It wasn't until we parked and Dakota lifted the large cooler and a large blanket that I finally realized that the surprise was a lunch picnic by the lake. I was so surprised when it finally registered. I loved it!

It was all so calm, so peaceful, yet so romantic (Dakota suggested that the only thing that could make it better was if it was a warm summer night and he could watch the Northern Lights dance in my eyes). As we ate, we just talked about everything there was to know about each other and more. Soon afterward Dakota somehow managed to convince me to join him as he slipped off his shirt, pants, shoes, and socks and started swimming in the lake.

Occasionally his body would jerk around and he would start laughing. Turns out the fish decided to join us, which somehow made everything feel more special. The only thing that would've made it better was if our little girl decided to join us. Sure enough, she found a way to give us a jump when we allowed our bodies to float on top of the water. Thankfully we both knew how to get our balance back, but it was still a pleasant surprise that our little terrorist came around.

Olivia went on us stories about our future selves going out and playing just like we just were. It gave both Dakota and I the greatest feeling knowing that the good times were still ahead. We also welcomed it with a long kiss that seemed to stop the world once again. After about four hours we both decided it was time to go

home. At first, I wanted to smack Dakota for having us drive all the way soaking wet and still in our underwear, but he saved himself after he pulled out a couple towels. We each gathered our clothes and got dressed in the bathrooms by the camping area, each of us laughing at how silly we looked. When we finally packed up to leave, I noticed a text message was on my phone that I left in the glove compartment. Turns out it was someone who I hadn't talked to in a long time.

'Hey, girl <3 Just saw you heading towards Murtaugh Lake with a guy! Hope he's cute! Love, BriBri! OH! BTW Jessica said she saw a bunch of cops out by your house yesterday, hope everything is okay!' she texted.

"You got a message?" Dakota asked.

"Yep! Looks like we got caught by my friend Brianna!" I joked.

"Well, that should make going back to school interesting."

"No it shouldn't be any problem, she goes to Canyon Falls."

Dakota started the car but paused as if he just remembered something almost random. "This Brianna, her last name wouldn't happen to be Summers would it?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered, "Why do you ask? Did you know her?"

"Yeah, we dated a little bit back in the eighth grade for a couple months."

"Oh? Well, what happened?" I asked, *'And, why are you bringing up past relationships?'*

"It was one of those rare break-ups where we both decided it probably best to go our separate ways," he answered, "I know it probably sounds weird that I am bringing it up, but I just wanted to be up front with you."

'Well, I guess that is okay. It isn't really that bad,' I thought to myself, "That's okay, I guess, as long as you two get along."

"As far as I know we do. It has been a while since we've seen each other, and nothing really major happened, so hopefully, time just smoothed things over."

"So you're not going to worry about your ex-girlfriend being friends with your current girlfriend?"

Dakota chuckles as he starts the car. "No, I'm not worried. I have no right to tell you who you can and can't be friends with. You're free to do whatever you want," he said, "The only time you'd ever see me step into something like that is if I got the feeling something dangerous could come of it."

"And what would you do if something dangerous did come up?"

"Simple, I would find a way to help you through it at any cost and in any way possible. If I have to carry you around the world or just be a goofy cheerleader, that's what I'll do," he answered, *'And I will stick to that promise until the rivers of time run dry.'*

'I know you will,' I said to him.

Dakota continued to drive home as I started to text Brianna back.

'Hey, Bri! Trust me, he is! He just took me on a lunch picnic and we went swimming in the lake!' I sent.

Moments later, a reply came in. 'Coolio. So tell me about him! Wat is his name? I saw that he was really tall.'

'His name is Dakota! He is actually a writer. And yes he is tall. I'm pretty sure he is taller than everyone at school.'

'O.o Is his last name Frandsen, and is he like 6 foot 11 or something?'

'Uh.... yeah, But I think he's only 6 foot 7.'

'Wow! How did you two meet?!'

'Well... he actually got me away from my stepdad.'

'REALLY?!?! That jerk is gone?!?! How did that happen?!'

'Something made him snap, he tried to kill me and my mom. But somehow, Dakota managed to stop it.'

'Wow, well then. You tell him that if he hurts you I'll smack him to death.'

'Think you might need 90-inch heels to do that.'

'IKR. Lol :D'

Brianna and I kept texting back and forth as Dakota drove. He didn't act like he was paying much attention to me on the way home, even though I thought I felt him start trying to get in my head a few times. He didn't stay long though, after I mentally whispered, "Girl Talk," each time. The next morning, the real test

for us began at school. Chances were that because Brianna and her sister caught us during our weekend adventure, someone else saw us. After a couple quick showers and some fresh scrambled eggs, Dakota drove us to school. Having a car ride to school was much nicer than riding the bus each day. No loud punks first thing in the morning. No idiots tossing around condoms. No weird sticky spots in the seats. Just two people getting sitting back on a normal morning, heading to school.

"You ready for today?" Dakota asked as we were halfway to the school.

"Not really. But it is not like we have much choice," I answered. I was tired that morning, trying not to fall asleep in the car. I ended up waking up at 6:30 am, same time as I always did. Dakota was already up, dressed, and working on something called "Project: Northern Star," on the computer in his office (he said it was a project that I inspired).

"You know it could be worse," he said, "We could be forced to live there."

"Good point. I'd hate to live with some of the girls from school."

"They giving you problems?"

"I don't really want to talk about it. But just so you have some warning, some of them pretty much assume that I'm a lesbian because they've never seen me with a guy before."

"I see. Would one of these so called, 'girls,' happen to be named Kristen White?"

"Yeah... how did you know?"

"I've crossed paths with her before. Needless to say, what happened wasn't very pretty."

"What happened?"

"In short, one of the first girls she ever harassed, named Macy Snider, started to dabble in some things in order to find a way to hurt Kristen without it ever being traced back to her. Something noticed, promised to 'help' her, and it caused her try to kill her kid brother and herself."

"You mean that actually happens?"

"Not as much as movies make it seem, but yeah it does happen. Except, something had gone wrong that night."

"What?" "Kristen came in about a third of the way into the ritual, when we tried our best to isolate everyone from the possessed other than myself and my mentor. Being that its intent was to kill, Kristen got hurt very badly. When the demon screamed, Kristen's back practically exploded in blood as something seemed to crave something into her skin. Upon examination, we could see that the Egyptian symbol for death was left. Ever since then, she has been under extensive monitoring."

"Why?"

"Usually markings look like nothing more than three very deep scratches from a very big animal. But when

an actual symbol, especially one from that long ago, appears then it is a sign something nastier may be coming."

"Oh, so what would you do if something did happen? And how do you know the possession was real?"

Dakota glanced over at me for a second and took a deep breath. "When during the ceremony, their skin starts to boil rapidly and blood starts to pour from wounds they never had before. And their face... it changes into something hideous. All of this happens very quickly."

"That is kinda horrifying, just hearing about it. I can't imagine what it was like seeing it happen."

"You don't want to imagine it. It doesn't really help that it was the first time I've ever had to go that deep, in fact, it has been the only time a case got serious. Plus... what we did took things to a much more dangerous spot." I could see a hint of fear growing inside his eyes as Dakota continued to drive closer to school. He took a deep breath before he continued.

"I don't really want to go into it right now because the specific details of how it works are kinda complex," he said.

] "Okay, we don't have to talk about it anymore if you don't want to," I replied, *'But I hope you talk about it later. Hearing you talk about this type of thing is amazing.'*

'I might. But if you are that curious, I guess I can tell you that my mentor and I were working on developing a new form of exorcism,' he telepathically said.

My face dropped. A new form of exorcism? How in the HELL was that possible?! I thought that a Catholic priest was the only person capable of performing an exorcism! And that had to be something that was passed down! In some ways, I didn't believe Dakota. But based on everything I saw him do, and how serious he was about what he was talking about was enough for me to at least hear him out.

A few minutes of silence passed as Dakota drove to school. Traffic gradually got worse, as we tried to find a parking spot. Soon, Dakota parked by a small Christian radio station that was across the street at a three-way intersection. The owners of the station let high schoolers park their vehicles there because they knew how many car wrecks happen in the main lots. However, barely anyone was smart enough to park there, so it quickly became our spot.

Once Dakota parked the car, I started to gather my things so I could make sure that I had everything I needed for today when Dakota stopped me.

"Shandra, wait a sec," he said.

'Why didn't I see this coming?' I asked myself, "What's up?"

"If Kristen gives you any more problems, there is something you can do to get her to back off," he answered.

'Okay... not quite what I was expecting,' I thought, "What is that?"

"The symbol that was carved into her skin; draw it in the air, using your finger, in front of her and she will back off."

"Okay... what was the symbol again? And why would she back off?"

"The symbol is the Amenta, the Egyptian symbol for the Land of the Dead. She will back off because of a sort of PTSD she developed because of the exorcism."

After his explanation, Dakota started to trace the figure in the air using his finger. He started by tracing a straight line towards his right, followed by an upward curve that leads into a straight line going to his left. He closed the symbol with a downward curve that met with where he started the first line. He then took his finger towards the bottom side of the first shape and drew a line straight down for about three inches. He moved his finger back to the base of the first shape and drew another straight, downward line that was twice the length of the first. Somehow I was able to see the image like smoke floating in mid air for a few moments before it disappeared.

I sighed with relief that Dakota's comments weren't what I thought they were going to be and simply whispered, "Okay."

We both got out of the car at the same time. I met with Dakota on the sidewalk just behind the trunk of the car, facing towards the school after we both grabbed our backpacks. He took his car keys and locked the car using a remote before sliding them into

his pocket and wrapped his arm around me. As our feet met the paint of the crosswalk, in front of the school, I wrapped my arm around Dakota's waist and gave him a gentle squeeze.

"I'm going, to be honest," I said, "I thought you were going to want to walk into school at different times so no one would think we are together."

"Don't be silly," he replied, "I'm dating a beautiful and intelligent girl. If anyone has a problem with it, then screw 'em!"

My cheeks started to burn when he said that. I don't know how he kept doing it, making me blush like that. It seemed like he was able to make me blush at least once a day. For at least a few moments, I didn't notice the many stares and whispers directed towards us. Dakota didn't seem to notice them either, or he just didn't care. Teachers either gave us surprised or disgusted glares as we passed them through the halls.

"Hey, do you want to just hang in the cafeteria till the first period?" he asked.

"Sure," I answered, "It beats just standing out here."

"True that."

The school's cafeteria was straight across from the main entrance to the school. A herd of children spilled out of the doors that were used as the main entrance, suggesting the breakfast was somewhat decent. As we got closer to the kitchen area, which was visible to us through small openings in the walls, Dakota was able to see what was on the menu before everyone else.

"See what we are having?" I asked him.

"Plastic egg and sausage omelets," he answered.

"Ah! A somewhat decent school breakfast. I guess I could just use it as a snack."

"It is what I always do. Are you still hungry though? I thought you said my scrambled eggs this morning filled you up?"

"They did... for a minute. I'm just always hungry."

"Oh, so you're like me. Good to know."

"Hey don't judge!"

"I'm not!"

I gave Dakota a gentle nudge in his shoulder as he reached for a plastic tray and placed a foam plate that held one of the dollhouse eggs. The eggs themselves were one of the better tasting food options we had at school, everyone just made fun of their cartoon drawing like appearance. I'm not joking, these things looked like something from the kitchen of my younger cousin's dollhouse. When we were finally at the end of the line, Dakota and I started to scan the dozens of tables for a place to sit. It seemed like the entire student body was in that room. Three arms started waving towards us as three guys shouted for Dakota. We could barely hear them over the noise.

"I think I have us a spot if you don't mind the people we'd be sitting with," Dakota said.

"I don't mind, as long as they're not jerks," I said.

"They have their days, trust me."

He started to walk toward the table, occasionally dodging seats that blinding moved in his way, where the arms seemed to sprout from like cartoon plants. Four boys sat in an unfinished star formation while rambling on about random topics.

"So, how was everyone's weekend?"

Dakota asked as we approached the table. Dakota jerked his backpack higher on his shoulder as he pulled out the only available chair so I could sit down. As he reached for an empty chair from another table to sit down, one of the darker skinned boys grew an impressed look on his face.

"Not as good as your's dawg," he teased.

"What do you mean, Marcus?" Dakota asked. '

"There is a rumor going around school that you got laid in Murtaugh Lake," said the Hispanic kid, "Wait is this her?"

I tucked my head behind my hand, embarrassed at the assumptions being made. Every time I met a guy I had been accused of being a slut.

'I'm guessing today is one of their days,' I telepathically whispered to Dakota.

'Guess so. I'm so sorry,' he answered.

'It's fine Dakota. It is pointless to fight the stupidity.'

'You're right. But that doesn't mean that we can't put a scare into it.'

A murderous look sprouted in Dakota's eyes. It was obvious that the way his so called friends were referring

to me was getting on his nerves and fast. It felt like he was getting ready to bury someone.

"Who is spreading it around?" he asked.

"I wish I knew, dude," said one of the other guys, "But to be honest, it looks like Elliot Fischer has been spreading it around the most. He's even texted pictures to some people."

"God DAMN him! I can't believe these retards actually believe that drunk fucker has to say," Dakota grunted.

"Relax, Dakota. This will probably blow over in a couple weeks," Marcus said.

"No, it won't. Not unless I weed out the person that sent the text."

"How the hell are you going to do that?" I asked.

"Easy. I just ask the message where it's traveled." Everyone at our table, even people at nearby tables who overheard, was confused. I didn't realize it at the time, but not everyone knew Dakota was good with gadgets. He was also the type to get crazy ideas (a sometimes even crazy enough to figure out how to pull them off).

"Any of you actually get the text?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Marcus, "Let me forward it to you."

"Please do." Dakota took a few short breaths before continuing on. He was able to calm himself just enough to function without using the table as a Frisbee to hit somebody.

"Now before this gets any further, how about I introduce everyone the proper way? Without accusing myself or my lovely girl of promiscuity?" Dakota suggested.

'Please do,' I pleaded with him.

"We weren't suggesting anything, Dakota, we were just letting you know something was up," said the fourth guy.

"I know, Branden, I know and I apologize for getting agitated, but you guys do know how that type of discussion gets on my nerves," Dakota explained, "Anyway, guys, this is Shandra. We just started seeing each other and to blow off some steam from something that happened over the weekend, we decided to sneak out and have lunch picnic by the lake. I can't really talk much about what happened but needless to say I'm glad it did as you can probably tell from the pictures since all they show is a young couple enjoying a nice swim together."

He turned his head towards me with a bright smile on his face. *'Which I hope we can go again,'* he whispered to my mind.

'As long as I can actually grab a bathing suit this time,' I giggled.

'As you wish,' he giggled. Dakota reached for my hand and planted a gentle kiss on my knuckles.

I smiled and lipped, "Thank you," to him.

He started pointing towards his friends to get started on introducing his friends. "And Shandra; this is

Marcus, Enrique, Lucas, and Branden. I guess welcome to our band of misfits and outcasts," he said.

"Hi, everyone. So how did you all meet?" I asked.

Like Dakota said," Lucas added, "We are the outcasts. The school doesn't want anything to do with us. We don't really fit with any of the clicks, and we're too ambitious and stubborn to stay quiet like they want us. We ain't the popular ones in school, but everyone sure as hell knows who we are."

"We all met back in middle school," Dakota explained, "Every single one of us was a bit of a drifter that got made fun of a lot. Eventually, we all found each other and kinda stuck together. And needless to say, we've been the reason schools in the area have stepped up their game in making sure shit gets done."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"We've been known to get a lot of people in trouble for things they normally got away with," Marcus said.

"There are a lot of things the school let students get away with, that we get mad at. And since we are the types to get violent against anything that tries to hurt us, or somebody we care about, the school makes sure we don't get angry," Dakota explained.

"Yeah, everyone got scared when your hulking boyfriend started throwing people like they were dolls," Braden joked. As the guys continued to talk, the picture message finally appeared on Dakota's phone. He went straight to work on finding the source of the photos taken of us by maneuvering through several images

and menus I thought could only be accessed by breaking a phone. Seeing him at work was like watching a stunt driver move through a nearly impossible course. In about four minutes time he managed to find a phone number, one I didn't recognize.

"Got it," he shouted.

"Well, that was quick. How did you do it?" I asked.

"Like I said, I just asked the phone where it was from. Then I used the school's wifi network like a cell phone tower to translate the phone's language to something I can understand, which gave me the list of phone numbers the picture was sent to," explained Dakota, "I can also access the phone remotely to dig up anything I can use to blackmail the person if the need arises."

"Are you sure you want to take it that far? I mean it is only a couple bad cell phone pics."

Dakota started to return his phone to the normal settings and opened up the phone's gallery as he took a few more short breaths. "You know what, you're right. And besides, now that I actually look at them, these pics aren't bad considering they were from a cell camera."

He stuck his phone in front of me and scrolled through the seven pictures taken of us. Somehow, despite the attached captions being, "Hey look! Big Dakota finally found a girl slutty enough to sleep with him," the pictures could pass as art. But in a couple

shots I noticed something with Dakota and me in the water that looked very familiar.

'Hey, do you see that?' I asked Dakota.

'Yep. He doesn't know it but that moron caught a couple good pictures of Olivia too,' he replied.

'How is that possible?'

'He just got lucky. I might actually have to compliment him on these shots if I get the chance.'

'Kill him with kindness.'

'I guess that works too. I was just thinking more along the lines of one creator showing respect for another's work.'

"Woah, wait! You're just going to let it slide?!" Enrique asked.

"Actually yes," Dakota answered, "I'm going to let this one slide."

"Why?" Enrique asked. "Simply because I have more important things to worry about than some punk using his talents to make fun of people," Dakota replied.

"Elliott Fischer has talent? Other than getting shit faced? And what other important things do you have going on? Another one of your freaky ass ghost hunts?" Marcus chimed up.

"Well number one, Elliott does have photographic skills. I've seen him at work, he is one of the best photographers I've seen. And number two, yes I mean my ghost hunts and you only call them freaky because you actually ran out on one!" Dakota laughed.

"Hey! You didn't see what I saw!" Marcus grunted.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Marcus decided to come along with me on a case about four months ago, before I came up with the fancy names and logos, and about five hours in I heard this loud bang than all of the sudden Marcus runs right out of the building like he was being chased by a chainsaw maniac. Turns out there was a pack of raccoons that were making the racket the family was reporting, and they plotted to scare the living daylights out of one of us. Thankfully we were just five blocks from Marcus's house, otherwise, he'd be running so fast home his clothes fly off like in a cartoon!" Dakota laughed.

"Ha... ha... HA! Laugh it up, white boy! Let's see who's laughing after one of those rabid bastards bites your dick off!" Marcus yelled.

I started to laugh at the story but was overpowered by the bell as it screamed for everyone to get to class. Everyone in the cafeteria flooded the exit at once, making it impossible to move around. I grabbed on to Dakota's hand as we hurried our way through the doors and into the main hallway.

"Why does everyone have to rush the hall at the same time?!" I shouted.

"Because their minds work like herds of sheep!" Dakota joked.

"No kidding. So what is your first class?"

"Speech, down in A hall. Yours?" "Gym. So I guess we should split now?"

"Not necessarily. I could walk with you, so we could talk a bit more. Besides cutting through the gym just might be a bit faster than stepping on these people."

"Oh? What do you want to talk about?"

We started to walk our way down was called the "D Hall" of the school. Many of the science classes were located here and lead to a small flight of stairs which were the back entrance to the gyms. My guess was that not many of the science classes started this early, or the classes were not large at all since this was the less crowded hallway in the entire building in the mornings.

"Well, the photos. I just wanted to make sure that you'll be okay," he said.

"Will you be?" I asked.

"Not if I know that you're not. I'd hate for you to have to go through the crap that might come from this."

"Dakota, don't worry about me. I've dealt with worse than this. I'll be okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I love that you care so much about me but I'll be okay. Don't worry."

"Hey, I'm your boyfriend. It's my job to worry about you."

"I know. But it is like you said, they're all idiots."

"Yeah, but you don't have to deal with it."

"It's not like they're going to do anything. These people are too ignorant to even think of decent insults. Those that do only sink themselves further."

"Yeah, you have a good point." Without realizing it, Dakota and I walked into the gym where my class was located. Girls and guys started to hurry into the locker rooms to get ready for class. The guys could be heard screaming and yelling like they were taking part in a gladiator fight. They always were like that. It was rather annoying. Plus whenever one of the coaches was gone for the day, the jocks would become much worse.

It was easy to tell when those days were happening, especially when Dakota had gym class since there was an incident that got one loud mouth out of a dentist appointment and nearly into a coma (since Dakota knocked out the teeth that were giving him problems).

Yeah, he may have been the nicest guy I know, but he also had one hell of a dark side. Thankfully, and I am honestly not sure how, but I was never a target of his dark side. In fact, it looked like my well being turning sour was often his trigger. He did talk about a couple incidents in his book, but it is very likely that you'll hear about a few more he never mentioned later on. But let's get back to the story before I get ahead of myself (one of the things from Dakota that rubbed off on me, lol).

"Well I guess I should be going," he said giving me a tight squeeze.

"Yeah, see you at lunch," I said.

"See you." Dakota snuck a peck on my forehead before jogging to and out of a pair of metal doors that lead outside. As soon as he was gone, my feet started

to move themselves to the locker room so I could get ready for class. Another metal door was in the way. As I started to reach for it, a light tingle started to fill my head. It was a familiar sensation, that only happened when one of two people was thinking about me (the second one I thought was dead).

'If they get to be too much, don't be afraid to come find me,' Dakota's voice said.

'Woah, Dakota, how are you able to do that?' I asked.

'The same way I can when we are a few feet apart. Though to be honest I've never been able to experiment with the range. I'm guessing the distance apart we are right now is roughly three hundred feet, give or take. This is likely my best.'

As Dakota was talking I walked into the locker room and hurried over to my locker. I started to mess around with the combination in order to get to my gym clothes.

'Four, seven, thirteen. Seems easy to remember.' Dakota chuckled.

'Yep. Same as my birthday. April seventh, right at one o'clock,' I said, *'Wait a minute! Are you watching me get undressed?!'*

]Dakota started to laugh. 'No, I'm not. Trust me. I happily am waiting to see it in person when the time is right,' he said, *'But in truth, I've only been able to master talking to someone with my mind. As far as actually being able to use their eyes to see something, that is a skill I have yet to master.'*

'Alright. I trust you.'

As soon as I opened my locker, I took out my gym uniform and started to tuck away my normal school stuff. I could still feel Dakota inside my head as I started to undress. It felt very creepy knowing that he could pop in any time he would like. But he swore he wasn't trying anything nasty.

'Well, it looks like things are calm. Almost like that text message never happened,' he said.

'See? Just like I said, no point in making a big fuss about a couple of bad cell phone pics.' I told him.

'Yeah, I'll give you credit there.'

I took off my blouse and bra and stuffed them into my locker as a girl walked up to me.

"Hey Shandra looks like you had a fun weekend," she said.

"Oh hey, Jennifer. It was good. How was yours?" I asked.

"It was alright. But not as fun as a swim in the lake."

] "You can tell we weren't doing what Elliott thought right?"

"Yeah, he has always been a jackass. I don't know why I ever dated him."

"You dated him?"

"For about a year, the biggest fucking mistake I've ever made," she sighed, "So when did you and Dakota start dating?"

"Over the weekend. He was helping me with something that happened my house, and I don't know, we just sort of bonded."

"Well, that's cool. I'm sure he'll be good to you."

"Hey! Quit staring at my breasts, Lesbitch!" screamed one of the other girls.

I quickly slipped on my athletic bra and scanned the room to find out who was yelling. I hurried to get dressed since I knew time was running out for class, but I needed to find out what was going on.

'That voice sounds familiar,' hinted Dakota.

'Yeah, I know,' I whispered to him.

"Kristen, leave my sister the HELL alone!" shouted Jennifer. She turned to face her sister's attacker. To no surprise, the one person I thought was going to give me problems was responsible.

"Jenn, you fat, incestuous bitches should just kill yourselves. You disgust me!" Kristen screamed

"Fuck OFF! What in the Hell is wrong with you?! You know that was a damn lie!" Jennifer screamed. Some girls ran out of the locker room and out to the gym, panicking about the fight that was about to happen. Everyone else just watched. I, however, was ready to throttle Kristen. She and Jennifer continued the screaming match for what seemed like hours.

'Anger is not a sexy look on you,' Dakota joked.

'Not the time, dude!' I said.

'Actually, yes it is. Remember what I showed you in the car?'

'I can't do that now!'

'Shandra, as much as I hate to say it, you are watching a nuclear overload. Something needs to be done and fast to simmer it down before someone ends up dead.'

'Alright, I see your point,' I sighed, 'Wait, how will it do any good if she doesn't see the symbol?'

'Shit, I forgot that detail. When you draw that symbol, she will feel a very sharp heat sensation where it was cut into her skin. Normally, it would only feel like grabbing a hot pan out of an oven without a heat glove. But when she is aggravated like that, a nasty rash that is photosensitive will appear on her back. So far that has only lasted two hours at most.'

'What if this time it ends up worse?'

"Wait for a second, Jennifer? Are you dating that slut, Shandra? You Lesbitches get it on in front of Dakota all weekend?" Kristen screamed.

'THAT BITCH!'

'She's all yours.'

I took a deep breath and pointed two fingers straight at Kristen. I straightened my arm out and slowly traced an amenta in mid air. Kristen quickly froze as I finished the top portion of the amenta and started to work on the straight lines that came straight down. By then the entire room froze and stared at me as if they knew something was about to happen.

"Shandra, what are you doing?" Jennifer asked.

"Just watch," I told her. I finished the first straight line, which started to draw tears from Kristen's eyes.

She was frightened by what was happening. It was like she was accepting that she was about to be executed. At least that is how it felt to me. I started the second line, and I watched as the whites in Kristen's eyes turn a throbbing red in an instant. Something inside me started to feel guilty about what I was doing, but that guilt had no control over my body. The very second I finished the second line, everyone gasped as Kristen fell to her knees with tiny drips of blood that mixed with her tears. She even started to drool red waterfalls.

'Oh my god,' Dakota gasped.

'Dakota... did... I just... kill her?' I was afraid of the answer when more blood started to fall from Kristen's back.

Chapter 6

Immortals?

'Shandra...' Dakota whispered.

'... Is she dead?' I asked.

'No, she is just injured. Badly.' 'I thought you said it would only burn a bit.'

'I did. I also said that it might be worse if she's aggravated. But that has never happened before.'

'What should we do?'

'I have an idea. Walk over to her and kneel down so your eyes are at her level. Also, ease your breathing. You're going to want to approach this like having to help a small child with a bad cut. You don't want her to freak out otherwise you'll lose her.'

'Are you sure? Cause you didn't seem to know about her ending up like she just survived a massacre!'

'To be honest, I'm not sure. But I have a feeling that there might be something else going on that will help heal her if we turn the tides.'

'Really?'

'Yes, just do as I say and it should work.'

'Alright.'

I slowly approached Kristen, who was about ten feet away from my gym locker. I could feel some sort of energy, that felt like static, coursing through my body. Everything felt so unreal, almost like it was taken straight out of a comic book movie. As I stood in front of Kristen, I thought I could feel Dakota's presence in the room.

'Now as you kneel down in front of her, imagine you holding my hand. Once you feel that connection, visualize a white light coming out of my hand and going into your body,' Dakota said.

'Got it,' I told him. Following Dakota's directives, I imagined the white light from him entering my body as I sat on my knees in front of Kristen, making sure our eyes were the exact same level. The static I felt in my body started to mingle with Dakota's light, making it feel like a powerful essence. It is so hard to describe, but it felt amazing. Yet somehow, the sensation felt a bit familiar.

'Good. That tingly feeling is completely normal. When my abilities first started to show up, that is how it felt. If you keep doing this the tingling should go away,' Dakota added.

'That's fine,' I told him, *'But what do I do now to heal her?'*

'Just channel the energy through your body, passing through your heart, and into your other hand. Let concern

for Kristen in your heart add to the energy. It will help with what we need to do.'

'Okay.'

I felt the energy quickly grow stronger as it moved through my body. I used my left hand to bring in Dakota's energy and move to my right, the same hand I used to nearly kill Kristen. I had no idea how I knew how to do this, but I had no time to ask questions.

'When you feel a warm, relaxing sensation in your hand I will instruct you on how to draw two symbols to help heal her. They are runes from Norse mythology,' Dakota said.

'Norse?' I ask.

'Vikings. Remember the painting with the Valkyries?'

'Dakota, you can't be serious!'

'Call me crazy all you want, Shandra, but if this works I may not be the only one in this relationship with a few special tricks.'

'Just tell me what to do! My hand feels hot!'

'Alright, with your thumb, draw a small circle on the top of her forehead. Then draw a straight line from the bottom of the circle, straight down until you hit between her eyebrows. This symbol is called the Sól, it represents the healing power of the sun. You both should feel a warm sensation where your skin touches hers. This is a good sign. If I'm judging this correctly, we should see the effects immediately. And if so, there will be one more symbol we will try to clean the mess up.'

Without thinking about what the other two symbols could be, I got to work with the Sól symbol. I didn't

know how it was possible, but a dim light actually appeared on Kristen forehead that followed my finger as I drew it. Immediately, the red from Kristen's eyes disappeared and the blood and tears quickly dried up, almost leaving no trace. Somehow the blood that fell from her back even started to disappear when the symbol was finished.

'Now, when the light on her forehead begins to fade, draw a cross in the exact same spot. At the bottom of the cross, draw a diagonal line going northwest. Make it to where it goes about halfway between the horizontal line and the bottom of the cross,' Dakota said.

'And what does this symbol do?' I asked him.

'It is called the Wolfsangel, it is said to be used to bind and eliminate harmful influences. Hopefully, this will make it to where whatever is upsetting Kristen doesn't affect her as much and she will start being nice to people.'

'And if she isn't?'

'I think you already know, now hurry.'

As the light from the first symbol started to fade, I quickly started to trace the Wolfsangel on Kristen's forehead, as instructed. Almost immediately after I finished, her blood that fell on the floor seemed to evaporate like water instantly. Kristen started to breathe calmly and slowly come out of her shock.

'That is what I was hoping to see. One more move and this event will disappear like a bad dream,' said Dakota.

'How in the HELL is that possible?!' I nearly screamed.

'Something that I have arranged myself. Do you know the symbol for the planet Saturn?'

'Yeah, why?'

'Because we are going to ask him for a favor.'

'You don't mean... How is that even... How?'

Before members of the audience judge, think about how you would react if you witnessed what I have just by being AROUND Dakota. I haven't even begun to go into detail about the crazy stuff that happened. So far; he was showing me ghosts, time travel, reincarnation, and superpowers among everything else. So immediately, I began to think that he was hinting ancient gods... were real.

'I'll try to explain later,' he said, 'But for now, draw the symbol and visualize me right next to you.'

'Got it... wait two of you are already here. One in white and one in black,' I said.

'Even better, just let their energy merge into yours and mimic exactly what they say.'

'Alright.'

I channeled the energy from the two Yin Yang Dakotas (sounds kinda mean I know) and fed it into the energies that already flowed to my hand. I could feel the power becoming ten times as strong as I drew the symbol for Saturn and all three Dakotas and I chanted at the exact same time.

'Saturnus, vos rogamus, retro telas tempus. In tantum ut iam ex memoria lectiones molestius tangere cutaneis et spiritus qui in hoc momento.'

I blinked just once, and I found myself standing in the same place and position I was in when I unknowingly began to torture her. Kristen had also been adjusted into the same position she was in as she was attacking June. Except for this time, she had a look of guilt on her face. The energies I felt from the two extra Dakotas had disappeared; leaving only Kristen, myself, and Dakota to fix the rest of the mess.

'Just go up to her and give her a hug,' Dakota suggested, 'And tell her to come find us either at lunch or after school, whatever works out better.'

'Okay,' I answered, 'But can you tell me what the chant meant?'

'Roughly, it means 'Saturn, we ask you spin back time. So painful lessons from now may only be remembered by the those who touch by skin and spirit in this moment.' I'll explain everything else at lunch. I'll talk to you later.'

I could feel Dakota cutting off the connection in my head that allowed us to talk to each other (at least I think that is how he would describe it). The pressure from another mind mingling with my own quickly became lighter, almost like finally figuring out a difficult math problem. I simply took a deep breath before walking over to Kristen to make sure she was okay.

"What just happened?" Kristen asked.

"It is hard to explain," I answered, "Just come here." I extended my arms to embrace Kristen in the warmest hug I could possibly muster for someone who had been relentlessly torturing me for as long as she knew of my

existence. She may have been a bitch, but she was still another human being that just experienced a messed up situation. And since it was partially my fault, I could at least do this much to make her feel better. As she slowly wrapped her arms around my body, I positioned my lips next to her ear just so I could pass along one last message.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"Dakota, told me to do it if I ever had a problem with you," I answered, "But I honestly didn't know that it was going to get that bad, even Dakota didn't know. I am so sorry."

"How was that even possible?"

"I honestly don't know. But I do have a couple suggestions that might help."

"What?"

"Start treating everyone nicer, apologize for what you have done, and do something to improve the lives of others. Also, come find me and Dakota either during lunch or after school. He might have something to help."

"I hope so because it still hurts."

"I can imagine. But be careful of who you tell this story to, because Dakota made it so only you, I, and he will remember it."

"How is that even possible?"

"I don't know to tell you the truth. But I bet Dakota will be able to explain it better than I ever could."

"Alright, I'll come find you two at lunch. You both have A lunch, not B, right?"

"Yeah, we do."

"Okay, I'll try to find you two."

"Alright, see you."

Kristen, already dressed up for gym class, slowly walked out of the locker room without acknowledging the others around her. When her fingers graced the metal door, she turned her head with her long blond hair partially covering her face. A look I never thought I'd see coming from her.

"June, Jennifer, Shandra, I'm sorry," she whispered, "I'm sorry about everything I've done to you."

Before any of us could say anything, she bolted out of the room, presumably to begin jogging the warm-up laps our teacher had us do during the start of class. Everyone else shifted their attention towards me. It felt as if the entire room was frozen in place.

"What just happened?" asked Jennifer.

"To be honest, you wouldn't believe me if I told you," I answered, "All you alright June?"

"Yeah, I'll be okay," she answered.

"Good," I said, "I guess I better head out to class."

I tried my best to act normal in gym class as if nothing happened. Everyone else seemed to constantly whisper about me during class, if not for the rest of the morning, and fall silent when I came close to them. Oddly enough, the conversations about me starting

and stopping at random were probably the most normal parts of the day.

I expected to be pulled out of class and expelled for what happened, but nothing even hinted at the possibility of it actually happening. By the time second, third, and fourth periods came around the reactions were still the same. I tried to reach Dakota using his mind-radio-trick-thing several times but with no result. I was convinced I was doing it wrong. Once the bell for lunch rang, I hurried out of class to meet up with Dakota so I could finally a chance to talk about what happened with Kristen.

'Dakota, can you hear me? I've been trying to reach you all day! I need to talk about what happened with Kristen,' I said. I thought I could feel him about to speak, but kissing noises and the sounds of immature laughter coming from behind me threw me out of focus. My fists started to clench, thinking I already knew exactly who was making those noise. I turned around to get a good look at them.

"Hey, bay-bee, why don't you and I head down to the river and let the waves soak us in," said an annoying voice, "Let me show you how a real man fucks his bitch."

Elliot Fischer and his two dimwitted shadows started to laugh like they each had guzzled down a bottle of vodka. If only I had those bottles to beat them upside the head.

"Go away, Elliott!" I screamed.

"Hey! Don't you talk to me like that, cunt!" Elliott whined.

"Yeah, don't you dare talk to him like that," cried one of the shadows.

"Yeah!" shouted the other. Before anything else could be said, a large Titan hand appeared out of nowhere, slowly stretching outward as if it was preparing to swat away tiny pests it could've easily eaten. Elliot readied to backhand me across the face, oblivious to the fact someone was about to do the same to him. I smiled and quickly took a step back as the large hand swooped down, striking all three guys in a single blow. Their bodies flew into a wall of lockers, making a sonic boom that quite literally shook the entire school.

A look of death burned in the eyes of the man who owned that hand as he readied for the retaliation. One of Elliot's groupies got up first and took a swing at Dakota. His fist made contact with Dakota's chest, but Dakota barely reacted. The second groupie tried to do the same, with still no reaction from Dakota. Instead, he simply waited for both of them to take a swing at the exact same time. He would then grab the outstretched arms and started to twist them together like he was making rope. While holding the tied arms upwards, Dakota then used his large foot to plow directly into the goons' armpits, sending them flying into Elliot as he tried to stand back up.

"Real men, do not talk to ANYONE that way," Dakota shouted, "You dumbasses were warned about

attacking me or my family. Yet as always you never fucking listen... wait, have you morons been drinking?"

"Smells like rum to me," shouted another familiar male voice. Dakota and I both turned to see who had joined the conversation. Officer Jerome stood behind Dakota with his arms crossed. It looked like he had seen everything go down.

"Elliott, Edward, Riley... follow me," said Officer Jerome, "Dakota, Shandra... why don't you two get some lunch? I'll talk to you two later."

"Alright, we will see you later," Dakota said.

'What the heck just happened?' I asked him.

'I texted Jerry once I saw Elliott start eyeballing you like he was about to try something,' Dakota answered. Officer Jerome quickly took all three of the pests into his office.

'And he came that quick?'

'Well Shandra, it is a unique situation. There are a lot of unusual circumstances, heck it would be safe to say the arrangement with you is equivalent of hiding a president's family after an assassination attempt.'

'Is it really that serious?'

'For me, it is. Like I said, you are like family, I'll guard you with my life.'

'But how are you going to do that when you get handcuffed?'

'Idaho law has way too many loopholes for that to happen, trust me.'

'Are you sure?'

'Trust me, just watch when the time comes. It doesn't take being a high ranking politician to become a master at law.'

'I'm going, to be honest, Dakota, that's a bit harsh.'

"Shall we head to lunch?" Dakota asked loudly.

"Sure... I guess," I answered.

Dakota wrapped his arm around my neck so we could walk to lunch together. As our feet practically marched in sync, I began to wonder why he bounced from one conversation to the next.

'Sorry about the quick change, I figured we should try to beat Kristen to the lunchroom,' he explained.

'It's okay, I guess. You just kinda threw me off bouncing from one conversation to the next.' I said.

'Again, sorry. I've been trying to kick that habit for a while now.'

'It's fine, I can imagine that you've had to switch like that several times. But if we can jump back to the law side of our conversation, I am wanting to know where you get your idea from, that it wouldn't take much to become an expert at law here?'

'Right, sure. I will give you that my explanation was a bit harsh, but it is, unfortunately, the truth. Heck, even Idaho lawmakers don't understand Idaho law at times. But the best way I can tell you the solution for our problem with Elliott only relies on one simple question...'

'And that is?'

'How good of an actress are you?'

'Really? That's it?'

'Yep, that is it. So are you?'

'Better than you might expect.'

'Alright, so with that we should probably work out our story, just to cover our bases. I know Jerry is going to want to put a show for the dumb ass principals who think they have power over the school.'

'Alright, well it is simple. Elliott and his lackeys started to sexually harass me while I was on my way to lunch when after telling him to back off he started to make threats and gestures which would indicate he was wanting a physical altercation. You happened to come up, saw the whole thing, and took action right as Elliott was getting ready to hit me.'

'Good, that is pretty much what I was going for. But for my side, I was going to include how all three of them have a reputation for getting drunk and getting violent. That is what is going to bury them. As for me, they are probably going to push for a separation period so we both could cool off. Which the last time that happened I ended up in PASS room, even though the little notice the principal supposedly sent never made it to the PASS room teacher. Needless to say, I stayed anyway and enjoyed it better than the class I was supposed to go to at the time.'

'Are they going to do that again?'

'Maybe, we will see how Jerry goes with it.'

Both of our attentions were caught by the sight of food being handed out by the lunch ladies. If my memory is correct, I believe lunch was finger steaks and french fries. But that wasn't important. What was im-

portant was our game plan for dealing with Kristen. Dakota also knew, more so than I did at the time, how important was Kristen's overall well being. So much so, we ignored the lines of idiots trying to continue harassing us about our weekend adventure.

We found a completely deserted table, surprisingly far from Dakota's friends who I thought would join us again, to set up shop. I often compared the vibe I got from Dakota to company executives getting ready for a lunch meeting. His professionalism was unbelievable for a guy his age. The entire time he focused on three things; Kristen's well being, my reactions, and the meal he sat in front of him.

"So are you ready for this?" he asked.

"Do I have much of a choice?" I asked him.

"You always have a choice," he answered, "This part of the job is very difficult, especially under these weird circumstances."

"You mean someone being cut by an invisible force? THAT has happened to you before?!"

"Not in this context."

"So what are we going to do?"

"We just need to talk with her for a few minutes to see what is going through her mind, just to make sure she is okay."

"How can anybody be okay with what happened to her?"

"Just wait and see. Besides, through this experience, you may find out that you and Kristen aren't so differ-

ent." Somehow, right on cue, Kristen walked right up to our table. She was almost unrecognizable without her snotty attitude that made fresh milk curdle. I was in disbelief of what I was seeing.

"Is it alright if I sit with you two?" she asked.

"Of course," Dakota answered, "We were actually hoping that you would come by. I heard this morning got pretty rough."

Kristen sat down as she looked like she was trying to hold back a rude remark. Her eyes squinted so tight, it almost cut off circulation to her whole face. She sat her tray down so she could pull out her chair. The moment she sat down, Dakota reached his hand over Kristen's and gripped very tightly. His eyes started to dig deep into hers.

"Kristen, I warned you something like this would happen if you kept going," said Dakota.

"How could you have known?" she asked, "Shandra, how did you know?"

"Dakota told me to do that. He walked me through the whole thing," I answered.

"Why?" she asked.

"Kristen, if I wasn't intervening, the things coming for you would be several times worse than what happened," Dakota said. As soon as he said that, Kristen started to break down in tears. Her cries were silent at first. Dakota moved over to her as soon as he could tell she was about to make a scene and wrapped her in his arms.

"How long has it been since Zack's accident?" he whispered.

"Three... three years," she answered.

I could see that Kristen was starting to relive a horrific moment, one where she first hears the tragic news about a very important man in her life. My mind kept flashing back to the day I found out my real father supposedly died. Kristen was a near perfect replica of my image from that day, from the tears that wanted to wash away the truth to the hands wanting to grasp the one thing that would take us far, far away. I was starting to see why Dakota saw Kristen and I was similar personalities in a dark world that tried to consume us.

The only difference between her and I was that she was trying to find a way to burn everything that came close to her. Probably something I would've done if I didn't have Dakota to distract me.

'What are you doing to her, Dakota? She is about to lose it,' I whispered to him.

"Time has certainly gone by, hasn't it?" he asked Kristen.

'Dakota! Are you hearing me? I think we should back off!' I nearly screamed.

'Shandra, just wait,' he said, *'What I am about to say is something that needs to be said.'*

"Maybe for you," Kristen said, "But it feels like it was just yesterday. I swear I see him sometimes, late at night. He would always look like he was upset."

In that moment I started to notice a difference in the air around Kristen. It was like the distortion one would see when in the middle of a desert. The temperature around us started to drop slowly, making the area around us feel colder. Clouds of our breath would form and linger in front of our faces.

"Kristen, your brother could very well still be around watching over you. To be honest, I don't think your brother wouldn't like seeing you treating other people the way you have been lately," Dakota said. Something about the chilled, brisk air around us made it feel as if a concerned soul was in agreement with Dakota. Was it Kristen's brother?

"How would you know? How is that even possible?" Kristen asked.

"There are a lot of things that cannot be explained, at least not with the crap school curriculum that is... very well nation wide. Here in Idaho is the worst," Dakota said.

"Then how would you know?"

"I think you know the answer to that already."

Kristen looked at Dakota with dead eyes, as if the exorcism was nothing more than a folk tale. She didn't act she believed any of it, or better yet, it was supposed to be an event never spoken of again. It must've been intense, what happened, and the pieces were still being picked up.

"Whatever. I just wish there was a way to talk to Zack again at least once," Kristen added.

'Is that even possible, Dakota?' I asked.

"There is a way to do that. Do you have a radio that can receive AM?" Dakota asked Kristian. "Yeah, my alarm clock."

"Do you have to have a voice recorder of any kind? Even if it is an app on your phone?" he asked, *'Pay close attention to what happens Shandra, this may end up helping you.'*

'How so?' I asked.

'I'll explain later,' he said, "Cause if you do, Kristen, there just might be a way for you to hear his voice again..."

"What? Suck fresh chicken blood while I am completely naked and I should see him come out of the radio?" Kristen joked.

Even Dakota, who had been trying to stay serious the entire time, let out a few chuckles in response to Kristen's joke. For me, I was completely freaked out since this was a side of Kristen I never saw. Most of her "jokes" were sarcastic in nature, meant to harass whoever was in a forty foot radius.

"No, not quite," Dakota giggled, "Whatever you wear is up to you, though I would hope your older brother wouldn't jump at the chance to see his little sister naked."

"Yeah... right," Kristen responded, "So what then? How do I allegedly talk to my dead brother?"

"Well, it is really easy to do. Tonight, when you get some alone time, take your radio and set it to the low-

est frequency you can find. Make sure you can only hear static come through. Then focus on the image of your brother and simply ask if he is around."

"So, what do I need the recorder for? And not too geeky of an answer, please?"

"Alright, the less geeky version," Dakota responded, "Well, the theory is that white noise, or static, can help a spirit communicate. People try to say it is because spirits exist on those frequencies so by tuning something just right, you can help them speak. When in truth, your mind is a bit more relaxed, which helps you focus on your surroundings. The recorder will serve two purposes. If you can attach headphones to it than you can have another source of static help you listen in. It will also help you actually hear your brother's voice in real time if it works."

"Oh... okay, that makes sense. But how do you know it would work?" Before Dakota could answer, the cold air around us seemed to be moving around by itself, like it had an actual body it could manipulate. The waves I mentioned before, moved a part of its "body" just over Kristen's head and began messing up her hair. It looked like an older male figure had reached down and rubbed her head. Some people that happened to be listening to our conversation noticed Kristen's hair moving by itself, with no visible source of wind, and practically froze as their eyes jumped from their sockets.

"What the heck?" Kristen nearly shouted. Dakota lifted a single finger, pointed to the wavy air and smiled.

"THAT is how I know!" he said. Kristen quickly shivered in response to the cold hands that brushed her hair. I could almost hear her heart stop once she realized what was going on.

"Was that..."

"Yeah," I whispered, "Your brother is here."

'Good to see you're catching on,' Dakota confirmed, *'You're right on the money.'*

Throughout the entirety of our conversation, all three of us impulsively ate our lunches, only stopping when our forks met our tongues completely naked of any food. We all set our forks down on our lunch trays, waiting for the other to continue the conversation. Even the spirit of Zack felt like he was eagerly waiting for his little sister to speak up. Apparently, he was trying to get in touch with her. Kristen started to look like she was lost deep in thought before having the courage to say something.

"Alright," she said, "I guess I'll give it a try tonight. But I better go, I have to meet with someone about an assignment for English class."

"Alright, see you around, I guess," I said.

"See you," Dakota said. Kristen and Zack immediately left the table as Dakota got ready to continue the conversation with me. I sat and wondered what aspect

of the conversation we had was going to be needed for my future reference.

"Nice job, by the way," Dakota said.

"Thanks," I replied, "But what did you mean when you said it might help me later?"

"Well, I thought that it may help trying to decode whatever happened to your biological father."

My eyes nearly started to swell up. I felt excited so much my entire body started to feel like a little girl I was when my father got back during his leave just in time for my birthday. I remember walking up to this big box I found in the middle of the living room, just after I got home from school. For weeks, my mom was teasing me about some HUGE present she and dad got me for my birthday.

I was wanting a gorgeous pair of blue, sparkly inline skates so I could race my friends when we weren't at school. The size of the box was way too large for skates, which immediately told me something else was inside. I opened up the box, to find the actual skates strapped to two thick, muscular arms wrapped in army sleeves. The skates almost looked like they replaced the man's hands. A head soon rose from the box, making me happier than anything else could in the world. My father was home. But it isn't like that really mattered anymore.

"How would it help? Even if he is alive, it would impossible to find him. If he is dead, what are the chances

of me even seeing him because of how crazy things have been?" I asked.

"Shandra," he said, "The moment things started to calm down, the day I came to get you, did you happen to feel like there was anyone else around? Someone who was trying to help you feel better about the situation?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that was you." Dakota smiled greatly as he was flattered by my suggestion. He even sprouted a few shades of red across his cheeks.

"No, not me. I was meaning before I got there," he said.

"Well, no. I was too stressed out to even see straight," I told him, "Wait... did you see anyone?"

"See? No, I didn't. My gifts don't necessarily work like that. Though that would be cool," he joked, "But I did feel someone there who was worried about you. They didn't stay long, just long enough so I could get a vibe from them. They felt like they had like an aunt or close sister sort or relationship with you. She also felt like she was at least twenty-six. I may be off though, I was focusing more on finding and helping you."

"Do you happen to know her name?"

My heart began to sink. The vague description could only fit one person in my life.

"Actually, now that I think about it, there is a name that does come to mind. I believe it started with a C," he said.

"Would it be Carol?" I asked. "Actually, that sounds about right."

"She was my aunt. She died of cancer when I was six." Tears began to spill from my eyes. I loved Aunt Carol. Growing up, she was the closest thing I could call a best friend. She was my biological father's adopted sister. I never knew much about her real family, but she knew me better than my own parents. The day she died, she made a promise to me that she would always be watching over me, and be there the day I got married. Random memories, good ones, kept flashing over and over inside my mind. My smile must've given away some sort of detail since I noticed Dakota started to emit the same warmth that healed my wounds.

"I'm guessing she was able to keep a promise," he smiled.

"How do you know?" I asked him.

"This isn't the first time I've delivered that news to someone. The reaction goes one of three ways; bliss, relaxation, or guilt. Thankfully I can see yours is the best of the three."

"I am guessing mine would be considered bliss."

"Yep. An enjoyment in acknowledging that a person who had a tremendously positive influence on your life still lingers from their afterlife."

"What are the other two reactions?"

"Well, relaxation is simply taking comfort in seeing a familiar face after being separated for quite some time. It often mixes in with bliss at times. Then guilt usu-

ally comes when something very wrong has happened the living know very well the dead would be furious to know about."

"How often has that happened?"

"More often than I would like to admit, to be honest. But going back to my idea, how would you feel about trying to strike up a conversation with your Aunt Carol?"

"I would love to! How would we do it?"

"Well, pretty much exactly how I told Kristen, but with a few minor adjustments."

"Like what?"

"Just a few gadgets to help set the stage just give you a better shot at hearing her. The version I gave her was pretty much was whatever scraps she might have lying around the house."

"Oh... okay. I'm not too sure what that means."

"Nothing really special. I would lay a few of my tools around the room to monitor the environment. Chances are if something does happen, we'll see it register."

"Now that I think about it, that would be something cool to get on video."

"You're right. That can be arranged as well."

"I figured you would have a lot of equipment like on the shows."

"I have a few similar toys, nothing really fancy, the cool stuff is kinda expensive. I have just enough to get the job done, and done well."

A bell rang through the hall to let the herds of students know it was time to swap out the lunch crowds. The freshmen and sophomores had A lunch, others had B (who got what lunch also depended on class schedule). When your group wasn't the one at the cafeteria, you /were supposed to hang out at a class called Advisory. It was probably the most worthless "class," in the entire building.

What we were supposed to do in that class was either homework or read a book. But there were two problems with that image; the first being virtually none of the morning classes seemed to know what homework even was, the second was only freshmen were forced to read as a part of our English class grade. One thing that some students did opt in for was the essay alternative to the computerized tests on school library books. If you didn't want to waste your time with those tests than you had the option to write a single essay to fill the requirement. However, there was only one person I knew who actually did do the essay alternative, the goofball I was dating.

"Onto the biggest waste of time this school has to offer," Dakota sighed.

"Whose Advisory period do you have?" I asked him.

"Ms. Nicole, in the home economics room," he answered, "What about you?"

"Mr. Carmack. We never really do anything in his room, except maybe feed his fish every now and then."

"At least that is something. Since none of the morning classes ever seem to assign homework, and I always do the book test early, there is nothing to do. I've actually put off doing homework just so I could pretend to have something."

"I've done the same thing, don't feel bad."

"I never do. There are just a few thousand things I'd rather be doing than just sit in there twiddling my thumbs."

"Like?"

"Well as of today, the list consists of; talking with you about whatever random subject pops into our heads, write a novel or twenty, climb a mountain in the nude, catch a movie, build a nuclear reactor with my bare hands, help a friend make a video game play through series online, just something! I'm all for being lazy but when I know there is work needed to be done I'd like to get it done as soon as possible so I can move on to something else more fun."

"A bit impatient, are we?"

"A little. Now we should probably get out of here before that little walk-in closet gets stretch marks because too many people are inside it."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

We both rose from our chairs, joined to each other at the waist, and started to dodge our way through the crowd to get out to the hallway. Some of the other students tried to shove us into walls to keep us from get-

ting through, others were trying their best not to get trampled by Dakota's size 17 shoes (at the time).

"I honestly wish that there was a way we could get out of here," I said. "Trust me, if there was a way I could get us to the south of Paris in the blink of an eye, I would do it," Dakota said. "Paris, Idaho?"

"No, France. A picnic in the Jardin du Luxembourg; a park with many different ponds, fountains, and glorious statues. Just you and I embracing each other's company while exploring whatever remnants of history remain without a worry in the world. A chance to create something even more special."

"Oh, wow. That is pretty deep."

"You're surprised at that? Oh, you haven't even seen my best work."

"I don't know if I should be excited, or scared at that," I joked.

"Let's see how it turns out," Dakota smiled, "We might just become immortal."

"What do you mean?"

Dakota's class for Advisory period was closer to the lunchroom than mine. He peered inside his class and sighed deeply. We kept walking towards the end of the hall, where my class was.

"Just maybe you and I will make something that will something that helps a part of us live on," Dakota tried to explain.

"Okay... I'm still not sure what you mean. I honestly don't think I would want to be immortal," I said, "Is it

even possible?" Dakota paused for a second, possibly because he realized what he was saying didn't make much sense.

"I don't know what I meant, to be honest. I have a tendency to do that, be worried if it actually happens. Sorry," he tried to explain, "But truthfully there is one way to become immortal, through art."

Dakota and I stopped in front of my Advisory classroom before the conversation could continue.

"Well, it looks like a half hour of Hell is about to start," I said.

"No kidding," Dakota chuckled, "Guess I'll see you in English afterward." Dakota gave me a gentle hug and kiss on the forehead before letting me go. I walked into class while quietly waiting for someone to comment on what was going on between Dakota and me, but without much success. Only one person commented something to the effect of our substantial size difference making Dakota and I a cute couple. Not much else happened, which lead my thoughts to go back to what Dakota was saying about immortality. Was it even possible? Did Dakota have some sort secret that made him immortal? Bull! If he was immortal, what the hell would he still be doing in high school?

He has made it very clear that he didn't like school, more along the lines of the people he was stuck with (which about 99% of the time I agreed with him). So what was it? Did he know about a fountain of youth?

Did he have some sort of elixir of life? I had to know what was going through his head. Why?

Well, think of it this... Has anyone ever pointed out something to you, that you never noticed? Something that had been going on for so long you never really paid attention to it, thinking nothing of it at all? Then, once someone says something, you CAN'T stop thinking about it? I can imagine whatever you are thinking of probably didn't have some sort of superpowers influencing the way you thought about it, but you can probably get pretty close to how confused I was.

I HAD to talk to Dakota about this. Not through telepathy, but in person. Thankfully, my thoughts let me skip ahead in time so Advisory wasn't as much of a drag. The bell seemingly rang sooner than it was supposed to, letting everyone free to move to their next classroom.

As I got out into the hallway, I found Dakota just standing as he scanned the crowds to look for me. I shot my arm in the air and waved it back and forth to get his attention. Yeah, I could've tried mind-talking to him but I figured he would have trouble distinguishing my voice from the others. Eventually, he noticed me waving and started walking my way.

'Is it just me, or did that period go a little fast?' he asked.

'I'm glad I am not the only one who noticed. I needed to talk to you about something,' I said. He picked up his pace so he could meet me at my side. A smile was plas-

tered on his face like he had just won some sort of grand prize.

"What did you want to talk about?" he asked.

"What you said earlier about being immortal, for some reason I can't get it out of my head," I answered.

"Oh? That could mean something. It might have something to do with the Valkyrie situation."

"How so?"

"It could be that a part you has always been alive, and wants to come back."

"How is that really possible?"

"It is weird. All in all, it is difficult to explain really."

"Alright... I guess. The way you were talking made it seem like you had a trick to it."

"Not really, nothing people didn't know already."

"Huh?"

"There is a saying by an Italian poet, I believe his name was Antonio Porchia, that stated, 'One lives in hope of becoming a memory.' Essentially he was saying we never truly die until the day comes the memory of us is gone."

"Okay, I think I understand a little better. So what, you are saying is that as long as there is something that helps keep the memory of us alive, we basically become immortal."

"Yep! For every paint stroke, every sentence you weave, every dance you do, every person, to every little breath; those who are born with creative talents have

a higher chance of essentially living a very, very long life."

"Oh, I see now! That is actually kinda cool. I just wish I had the talent to do something like that. I wouldn't even know what to make."

"Well, one thing that seems to work with most creatives is basing their work on what they know. An artist may paint the landscape in which he or she met their one true love. A writer may piece together characters based on his enemies and find clever ways to end their lives. All the best comedians lay their best material from true experiences in their lifetime. The worst of criminals have their immortalized passages built before them without having to lift a finger. All you would have to do is find some sort of inspiration."

"I don't really want to use what happened with my step-dad as inspiration for anything. The ass doesn't deserve the privilege!"

"I agree with you, whole heartedly. Hey, if you decide to do anything at all, that is all up to you. I'll help out where I can."

"Well, thanks. But how what would you suggest? So I could find something to write about."

Dakota and I took one of the back ways that lead to "The Triangle," so we could avoid the crowded hallways.

I never really noticed something about the other students until Dakota mentioned it, just about every single one of them stayed on the pavement the entire

time. Almost like those little robots that can only follow the path drawn by a special marker, everyone else in the school (even the teachers) stayed on the pavement when they went outside. And they had the nerve to call Dakota weird?

"Why not come with me on a case?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" I replied.

"I mean, come with me on a ghost hunt. You'll have so many stories to see and witness for yourself. Plus; if you are interested in history, forensics, image editing, or psychology you can get some first-hand experience that no textbook can show you."

"Really? It takes THAT much work?"

"More if you count maintenance, marketing, social media, public relations, and client relations. It is a business, no matter how you look at it. There is a lot that can happen."

"I bet," I said, "You know what... it sounds fun. I'm in."

A smile grew, nearly taking over the entirety of Dakota's face. I could hear him internally shouting in the excitement that someone was finally going to join him during his nightly adventures. To be honest, the idea of looking around for ghosts at night did actually sounded like it could be fun. You never know what types of things you might find!

"Awesome!" Dakota nearly shouted, "If you would like, you could help me sort through the last bit from my last case. I have it mostly done."

"Really? I thought that part of the job usually took a couple weeks."

"Normally it does, but thanks to my limitations, it cuts out a lot of work."

"Well, that sucks. There could be something the cameras could've seen that could prove something."

I was trying to impress Dakota early on when he first brought up the idea. I wanted him to think I had already had some knowledge about the whole paranormal thing.

"Let me guess, you've watched some of the ghost hunting shows," Dakota said.

"Yeah," I replied, "Is that bad?"

"No, not at all. It was how I put everything together."

"I thought you said you had a mentor?"

"I did. But he didn't come first. Basically what I did was take mental notes from the shows on television about what I should do and what gear I should get then adjusted to what was needed. My mentor came in when I started getting cases that dug themselves deeply, basically someone to show me the way in and out without falling."

"I see. That is interesting. So what could happen if something were to go wrong, specifically in the areas you needed a mentor for."

"You could lose the wrong soul, forever, essentially putting them into a sort of coma or worse."

"Wait... the things you do... can kill?!"

"If things go too far, yeah. But don't worry, legitimate situations like that are extremely rare. In fact, true hauntings only happen five, maybe ten percent of the time. Crazy stuff like they show in movies only happens roughly one percent of the five percent of the overall activity. And that alone is being generous."

"Wow, is it really that rare? Then why do it if the chances aren't so good."

Dakota paused just before the door to go into the hallway leading to our English classroom. He looked me dead in the eye as other students walked right past us. It seemed like Dakota was grabbing onto the world to stop it in its tracks just for this moments.

"Two reasons. Number one, to help someone through a situation few people actually understand. Number two..." he said.

"What?" I whispered. Dakota took a quick gulp before getting ready to speak again. A couple tears started to appear in his eyes. He leaned in for a long slow kiss as if he was trying to let me know what he was about to say.

'To take the chance to make something amazing happen,' we both said in unison.

"Exactly," he whispered, "That is what I live for."

The bell screamed at us to make sure we hurried to class. Our time outside was running short, and if we were late it wouldn't be long before the teachers would give us trouble.

"I guess we should get going," he whispered.

Dakota and I hurried to our English class and into our seats so our teacher could start the class. Nothing really important happened in that class, or anything involving school really. The jerks that harassed Dakota and me for being together eventually faded away and left us alone. We did eventually go see that movie and it was actually really good. I was surprised someone as young as Dakota could figure out how to make super-powers seem real.

Soon a few weeks passed, and I was allowed to go back home with my mom, even though I chose to stay with Dakota some nights. I helped him wrap up the footage from his first ghost hunt, which he took out to his grandfather alone. I had to deal with a family wedding that weekend.

A few weeks later Dakota came to me with a follow-up case at his grandfather's work due to an incident that allegedly took place in the main office. Apparently, the spirits were so pissed off about him being there, they literally took a shelf off a wall and threw it at Dakota's grandpa. What made him so mad, was the fact his grandfather was bone-thin due to cancer treatments. I guess I could understand why he would be so upset. The case itself was rather boring.

Now, on a side note. I know my husband didn't mention this in his book or the case the next chapter makes up, but stick with me. Somehow, this will all eventually make sense.

But back to the follow-up investigation. At first, it was rather exciting to be able to be a part of this, but during the case, nothing really happened. The very air in the place felt quiet and still, like a little kid praying to turn invisible because their parents found out about their misdeeds. Dakota was pissed the entire time, which I honestly expected something to happen to get him to shut up his words of torture, but again nothing really happened. For the first few hours, Dakota was with me just to explain the process and have me become familiar with all of his equipment. Since he didn't have anything really fancy, it was all quite easy to learn.

After it got to be around 11 o'clock at night Dakota suggested that we actually start rotating positions, one of us stay to watch the computer monitors and the other walk around. He even gave me the directive to just use whatever equipment I felt was needed in that moment, as he called it an exercise of woman's intuition.

After a few more hours, we decided to end the case on a deal. Dakota devised the idea to make a "spirit" set off a motion alarm. Basically, the deal was formed under the terms that we wouldn't return to bother them as long as they never tried to harm anyone in the building ever again. Within seconds, not even letting Dakota finish, the alarm was triggered and we went home. A week passed by as we looked over every aspect of the materials we collected, and very little "evidence" came

up. So, we were able to quickly shelve the case and move on. Though it didn't take long for something to happen to change everything.

Chapter 7

The Exorcism

It was the middle of June when it happened, the case that changed everything. I know this portion of the story wasn't mentioned by my husband, I honestly don't know why. Maybe it was out of respect for everyone that was involved, I can't be too sure. Dakota tries to keep the details about it quiet, to this very day.

You may think because we were practically one mind I would have some indication of what goes through his head, but he was more experienced in creating illusions. Personally, I think it is fear that kept him from telling this story. Whatever the reason was, times weren't as "pleasant" as Dakota made it seem. If I remember correctly, it happened on June 3rd.

Dakota and I were on summer vacation from school. On top of taking requests for ghost hunts, and other types of cases, we were planning our own little events to keep each other company. When not on the job; we would catch a movie, have a picnic in the park,

grab lunch at a random place in town, and occasionally make a trip to visit natural areas like deep woods and waterfalls. There wasn't much to do in our part of Idaho, so we made the best out of what we had. We were having lunch at a grill about a mile from a nearby bridge, popular with bungee jumpers when we got the call.

The restaurant was part of a chain that was the closest thing to a fancy dinner setting people in Idaho knew. It started out as any normal day as Dakota and I was talking about life in general between every bite we took. Dakota was sinking his teeth into a large barbeque bacon burger, with some of the side of fries smashed between the meat and bun. I had large nachos with extra peppers and salsa.

"So, are there any movies coming out you want to see?" Dakota asked.

"Not really. I kinda figured you would want to catch that new superhero movie that just came out today," I answered, "Maybe make it a date at the drive-in this weekend."

"It is getting kinda scary how well we know each other," he laughed, "Yeah I would like to see it. It's kind of a sentimental thing."

"Oh? How come?"

"My grandfather got me hooked when I was really little. And now that he has been dealing with cancer, and some parts of me worry he is about to lose that

battle, it has become a bit of a connection to him in case something goes wrong."

"Ah, that's sweet, Dakota."

Adorable red tints on Dakota's cheeks seemed to warm up the restaurant. I loved I was able to always get him to that, but this time the joy was short lived. Dakota's face suddenly dropped from the playful goof-ball I always knew to the serious investigator I came to know. He started diving through his pockets, very rapidly, to get out his phone. His phone wasn't making any noise, it wasn't even rattling like it was on vibrate, yet Dakota seemed to panic like an important call was coming though.

"I really need to take this," he said, "It may be a job."

"How do you kn..." I was interrupted by Dakota's ringtone. He immediately answered the call, becoming even more serious once a robotic woman's voice began to speak. He took the phone from his ear, typed in a series of numbers, and waited a couple seconds.

"This is Dakota Frandsen," he said. A panicking woman on the other end of the call made Dakota jerk. Something was definitely going on. A couple minutes seemed to fly away as Dakota was trying to speak to the woman on the other end.

"Alright, Mrs. Grimm, I need you to try and stay calm. How long has your daughter, Samantha, been acting like this?" he asked her. As I heard her try to explain the situation even further, I felt Dakota start to

connect with me mentally so he could pass on a message.

'Do you have your phone on you?' he asked.

'Yeah, why?' I replied.

'Something is going on that I want you to hear. Remember how I said that the hauntings shown in horror movies only happen one percent of the time, out of the five percent of real activity?'

'Yeah?'

'Based on what is going on in the background, this is the one percent.'

"Okay, I have that information recorded. Now, if you don't mind, I would like to get a close ear on Samantha and have a colleague of mine listen in just so we have a better idea of what is going on?" Dakota asked.

"Yeah, that is fine," Mrs. Grimm said calmly, "Is there anything I can do to make sure I don't get hurt?"

"There is," Dakota answered, "Get yourself a glass of water and add about three tablespoons of regular table salt. Be sure to mix it up."

Mrs. Grimm became too quiet for me to hear directly. But the rings of my phone quickly told me I would soon know more. I quickly answered, and kept as quiet as I could be to avoid causing problems. Something about the very way sound traveled made it seem like something Inhuman was taking over. There was a fight coming, and something deep inside my gut told me it was darker than anything I knew, something worse than any Hell I knew.

"Alright, I did it," Mrs. Grimm announced, "May I ask what does this do?"

"Essentially, it is a recipe for holy water. If your daughter is having some true issues, this will keep her at bay. I hate to say it like, but in some ways, it will act as a bug repellent," Dakota said.

"Holy water? Won't we need a priest to bless it?"

"No, ma'am. We won't need a priest to come in. You just called one."

'You're a priest?!' I nearly screamed. Dakota nodded his head in response. He was revealing another special surprise before my very eyes. I was dating a priest. The next thing I probably found out was that Dakota was also a trained swordsman at the rate he was going.

"I specialize in 'disaster relief' moments," Dakota said, "Very few investigators have my resources."

"So I've heard," Mrs. Grimm said, "I've heard a lot about you."

"Then I guess you know that my colleague and I will need to come in as soon as possible. Time is of the essence."

"Please do. I am running out of options. I'm afraid of my own daughter. What should I do with the water?"

"Keep a good image of your daughter, one of her at the happiest she's ever been. If she comes near you, imagine this moment is in the water and washes away the negative energy."

"Don't you have to recite some sort chant first?"

"Just do what I said, it'll keep her at bay. If she talks, don't listen. If she attacks, don't be afraid to defend yourself."

"I can't hurt my daughter."

"I know," Dakota sighed, "I'm not asking you to hurt her, I'm asking for your help to help her. Any sign of fear and the slightest bit of hesitation could put your life in more danger. I'll be able to get to your home in ten minutes. Just follow my instructions and you'll be fine till then."

"Okay, I'll trust you," Mrs. Grimm, "Sydney mentioned you were pretty smart about this type of thing."

"You're daughter was right. I'll see you in a few minutes." A roar on the other end of the line caused Dakota to cut off the phone call and get ready to practically fly out of the restaurant. Our meals were finished for the most part, and normally he would try to save what we couldn't eat so we could snack on leftovers whenever we needed to, but he looked like he didn't care if a meteorite struck the building, he had to get to the client.

"Check please," he shouted, "And can we get the rest to go?"

"Dakota, what's going on?" I asked him, "You're scaring me!"

"I'll explain in the car," he answered, "Right now we have to move quickly."

"Alright, alright," I said, "Just relax."

Dakota hurried over to our waitress and paid for our lunch before escorting me out of the building. I could feel his heart rate getting faster with each step, naturally making me very worried. When we finally got into the car, Dakota took a moment to collect his thoughts, giving me the opportunity to learn more about the S.O.S we received.

"Dakota, is everything alright?" I asked.

"No, one of my old cases has come to bite us," he said, "I have a really bad feeling about this one."

I could feel a sense of dread coming from Dakota. This was one case he was genuinely afraid, more so than any other situation I've seen him go through.

"What's happening?" I asked him.

"Remember how I told you Kristen was the target of a supernatural attack?" Dakota asked.

"Yeah," I answered, "Is there something else? And now that I think about it, didn't Macy Delevign go crazy and start ranting that some being named, 'Eliminos Ra,' was going to kill everyone?"

"She got that name after one of her experiments went wrong. She and three other girls were there that day, each one acting a little different after they swore they saw something approach them. Macy kept ranting the name and the others started to isolate themselves from the world. Macy Snider, acted as if she was hallucinating. The client's daughter, Sydney, was the worse of them. If this is legit..."

"Dakota, what's going on?!"

I could see a look of dread start to engulf Dakota's entire soul the moment he stopped. He knew something was going to happen, and the very possibility of whatever he knew being the very problem we faced, shook him more than anything else that I've ever seen.

"Dakota, if I'm going in with you, you need to tell me everything. I can't be let in the dark about stuff like this," I told him.

"When I first heard the name, Eliminos Ra, I immediately saw these flashes," he begun to explain, "I was with four others. I never heard their names or got a good look at what they looked like, but I saw they – better yet we – were brutal. We used swords and powers to slaughter hundreds. Men, women, children... it didn't matter, we took pleasure in their screams. Four of us looked human, but the fifth that seemed to lead all of us... he looked like some creature from the deepest pits of Hell. His skin looked like solid rock. Every part of his body seemed to emit a bright, burning light, as cracks in his skin would appear. He looked like an over dramatic volcano that was about to erupt. He was even worse than the rest of us..."

"Dakota, you don't mean..."

"I'm not sure what this means. I just know that there may be more trouble than we realize."

"What would we do if it does get worse?"

"We'd have to bring in everyone. Everyone that was at the ritual, and their target."

"Wait, wouldn't that put Kristen at risk?!"

"Yeah, I am getting the feeling they will try to kill her as was intended."

"What the HELL?! After what we did to her?! That's like asking the families of the March plane crash victims to hop on the jet after the funeral!"

"I know it's wrong but there isn't much choice if it goes down that route. I'll have a backup plan to keep her safe, by it won't look like much."

"No, no, Dakota, NO! We can't do it. We can't let anyone gets hurt, even if it is someone like Kristen."

"She won't get hurt, I'll make sure of that much. But she will be needed to change this."

"How?"

Dakota simply shot me a glare that told me everything I needed to know. No, he wasn't threatening me, he was pointing out Kristen was basically a sacrifice. Though I noticed something different in his eyes – it was like another being was inside Dakota, waiting to be unleashed against the new threat. Something was going to happen in this case, something to bring out the beings Dakota mentioned in his visions. Dakota started the engine and sped through traffic as quickly he could without crashing into other cars. I was surprised he didn't use a car trailer a semi was hauling as a ramp, that was how crazy he was driving. He was going to do anything and everything to save the day – it was one of the reasons I loved him, his willingness to do anything to help anybody even if it meant putting his life on the line.

Though, thinking back to that day, I realize that Dakota never asked Mrs. Grimm for her address – he just knew it. And if he had an assault rifle in hand, he would've slammed his entire body through the front door of the Grimm House. My heart was feeding off his energy, spinning adrenaline through my veins. This was going to be intense. When we got to the house, Dakota was pure business. He wasn't the lovable big guy that would never hurt anyone, anymore – he was a soldier waiting for a battle. The way he jumped out of the car and charged the house felt like a SWAT raid – except he was the battering ram and the entire squad in one body, he could even out shoot anyone he came across.

Maybe if he had a gun on him, he would've breached the house like he was a cop. Without any word to me, he walked right into the house. The front door was unlocked, which Dakota did hesitate to go through until the sound of animal-like screams shook the very foundations of the building.

“What the HELL?!” I screamed.

“Exactly,” Dakota joked. Dakota hurried inside the house and started moving frantically to find the source. The screams continued to amplify. I stood outside the house, too afraid to move forward.

“Fuck you, priest!” screamed an animal-like woman.

“BRING IT, BITCH!” Dakota roared. I started to walk inside the house, to get a better view of the “demon” we were facing. I knew Hell because of my stepfather, but I was too curious to not take a look inside and face

an actual being from there. Was there a difference between the evil that was the product of my past and a demon? As Dakota screamed while flying through walls of the entry hallway, I got my answer as something fly through the air like a leopard pouncing from a treetop. I immediately froze in fear at the creature I saw.

It looked human, but... I barely know how to describe it now. Bits of the girl's flesh looked both torn and burnt. Her skin was pale and bubbling. I could barely hear Dakota mumble something as he tried to recover the blows to his head, but as he spoke the demon's flesh continued to react as the bubbles exploded into waterfalls of black blood.

"You can't bring the little cunt back, priest, she is already dead," the demon taunted.

"You obviously have no clue who I am," Dakota responded as he seemingly made himself levitate with a wave of his hands. Vibrations in the air, moving like a desert mirage, encircled Dakota as his heart began to race. Two balls of energy emerged from his chest, one light and one dark, and manifested into two nearly identical copies of Dakota.

"Eliminos..." the demon whispered.

"No, not quite," said Dark Dakota.

"But we'd love to meet him some day," said Light Dakota.

"Shut up, you idiots and help me get her restrained!" ordered Dakota. All three Dakota's moved in unison to attack the demon. The two – doppelgangers I guess –

moved so quickly they only looked like blurs. Dakota began reciting a chant in Latin, which appeared to work like a sleeping pill by subduing the possessed one. I thought that by knocking out the demon that possessed her, Sydney would be able to peer through... that wasn't the case.

"Is she dead?" I asked Dakota.

"No, she is just taken a hostage," he answered, "But as you probably have figured out by now, negotiations will not be easy."

"What do we do?"

"That will depend on you. Because I have a feeling this will be rough, I'm gonna let you have a chance to get out of Dodge before things get started. But if you choose to stay, you will need to listen and do exactly as I say."

'Wait, you're going to give me an out? Wouldn't something follow me?' I asked him telepathically to avoid frightening the clients even further.

'There is a good chance we are going to get followed no matter what we do. If we leave, something will come to poke fun at us. We stay and win this fight, something will retaliate,' he answered, *'Unlike what movies show, this is war.'*

"I'll stay," I said without giving it a second thought, "You'll need me."

Dakota gave a small smirk before he turned to face Sydney, or rather what was left of her. He took a deep breath in just to relax his mind and body, so he would

be able to move forward without any emotion which could compromise the incident.

"What do we do now?" I asked him.

"Analysis and quarantine. Lock everyone inside, and find out how fucked we are," he joked.

"This isn't really the time for jokes."

"I know. I'm just calming myself down so I can think better."

"Alright, so what do we do?"

"We need salt and a lot of it."

"What? Wait, you mean salt circles actually work?!"

"Yes and no, they can help the situations but they are far from a cure all like Hollywood thinks."

"That is interesting. But shouldn't we ask Sydney's mom before we do anything?"

Dakota's eyes immediately widened. "Where is she?" he asked.

"Wait, WHAT?!" I screamed.

"Sydney attacked the second I walked through the door. I didn't see her mom at all."

I shut the door behind me as I hurried through the house. Dakota moved just as quickly in areas opposite of where I looked. The home was a single story building that seemed to combine both colonial and modern styles of decoration. There looked like nearly a dozen closets, a couple pantries, and several hidden crawl-spaces. I kept getting this sinking feeling in my chest our search wasn't going to turn up the best results.

The very sound of a leaky kitchen faucet made me paranoid I was going to walking into a fresh pool of blood at any second. I moved closer to the sound of the water, picturing that Sydney attacked her mother while she was following Dakota's directions, like a lion being lured out by poachers.

'Shandra, we got a problem,' Dakota warned, 'I found a body.'

'Please, don't tell me,' I begged him.

'Not human... canine. Sydney killed the dog. As for her mom, she is badly beaten. Thank god she was an only child.'

'What do we do?'

'We've got to get the police in on this.'

'Whats going to happen?'

'If we're lucky, we can get Sydney pardoned under insanity, and she will have to stay within a mental health facility.'

'I thought you couldn't plead insanity in Idaho?'

'You can't, but you can be deemed unfit to stand trial. But we don't have a lot of time to discuss the law. Mrs. Grimm's injuries can be fatal if she doesn't get medical attention soon.'

'How can you tell?'

'The bones are supposed to be inside the body, just for starters.'

'No, please, say no more.'

Flashing red and blue lights filled the house as they invaded through the windows. Several clicks of

firearms and radio static could be heard through the walls, warning us of the approach of several assholes who would shoot first and ask questions later. No offense to any members of law enforcement reading this, but it seems like too many of you just don't care.

'Start scrambling for medical supplies,' Dakota ordered.

'What?' I asked.

'Trust me, they're going to come in and try to shoot us before we have a chance to explain. The group that is working right now is under investigation for an assault on a pregnant woman. We've got to overwhelm them and give them no chance to act on the situation. There is a good chance we'll get shot at if we so much as open the door.'

'But... Dakota...'

'Shandra, we don't have much choice. Just keep moving and try to follow my lead. These are the type of people that made it so the only way to rebel against society is to be a decent person.'

I couldn't say much. Dakota's harsh tone started to intimidate me a bit, but I knew he meant well. I already knew cops were stubborn, and the odds the ones that wouldn't listen to me about my stepfather would be the ones responding were pretty good since we were in a smaller area. God, if they realized who I was...

'We got company,' Dakota interrupted.

I got a glimpse of our visitors Dakota warned about. Sure enough, three police cruisers and an ambulance parked themselves just outside the house, near Dakota's car, and got ready to storm the building. I

could hear the clicks of their pistols and the rips of Velcro coming apart on bulletproof vests.

'They're coming in hot!' Dakota shouted. I hurried over to the nearest window and nearly crawled outside just to get the attention of the two guys coming out of the ambulance.

"We need a medic! One adult female is severely injured, open compound fractures," I yelled, trying to use as many official terms I could remember from medical shows, "Be careful!"

The cops eased the tension in their arms and hand as their focus shifted from a hostile raid to a search and rescue oriented mindset (Dakota had an intimate knowledge of law enforcement procedures, and over the years to come he explained how a cop's mind worked in certain situations. A couple times he'd even predict how anything from bomb threats to hostage negotiations on the news would play out before the police would announce it).

"Where is the injured?" one of the officer's grunted as his group barged through the front door.

"In here!" Dakota screamed, "Quit fucking around and get this woman some damn help!"

"Please, I can't take it!" the client cried.

"Jesus Christ," whispered another officer. The cops and paramedics rushed into Dakota's direction. I followed behind them to get a look at how bad Mrs. Grimm's injuries were. A part of my mind still believed that it was impossible for a human to inflict so much

damage to another, bones would come out of the skin. If they did, it had to be because they were high on something like meth or what-ever-the-hell fucked up drug was out there.

But to quote my husband, we were entering a world of gods and monsters – there was nothing to prepare us for what truly was going on. No parental advice, no school teacher, nobody other than ourselves could warn us – all they did was get us to see the world is very different from what is inside a textbook. I followed the members of civil services through the house but immediately stopped when I notice large puddles of fresh blood, quickly spread along whatever surface it sat. I wanted to vomit.

“What the hell happened here?” asked one of the officers.

“My daughter... something is wrong with my daughter. It's like she's possessed,” Mrs. Grimm tried to explain.

“She called me in when her daughter started going crazy,” Dakota added, “When I got here, she immediately went after me.”

“What? Did you throw her through the wall that was messed up?” one of the officers joked.

“No, Detective Marks, she threw me,” Dakota glared.

“Watch your mouth, Frandsen, unless you want me to put a bullet through it,” Marks grunted.

“Detective, that is enough!” shouted another officer, “Dakota, where is this woman's daughter?”

"Sydney is in the other room, I had to subdue her. Drugs or demon, I had to take her out."

"What? Had to smack her around?" Marks scoffed.

"Listen, needle dick. There is no excuse for a guy to hit a girl but when she is on a self-destructive rage and TRYING to kill, something needs to be done. There is no fucking reason why anyone should try and hurt another individual, but there is every reason imaginable to defend one's life. You keep bitching at me, your motherfucking throat is gonna get bitten off by a ninety pound teenager!" Dakota growled.

Deep, hellish, laughter seemed to erupt from all directions in response to Dakota's rant. I froze in place and felt the room start to get excruciatingly hot. Everyone else acted like they were feeling the intense heat as well.

"What the hell is happening here?!" asked Marks.

"Get ready," Dakota whispered, "She's coming."

A whimpering sprang up behind me. It sounded like a girl, about my and Dakota's age, crying after she witnessed a horrible incident.

"Please, help me, they're trying to kill me," the voice cried. I turn to face the source of the voice, it was Sydney! She looked pale, weak like she had been starved for days. The marks from her possession disappeared, like whatever demon took control of her was gone.

"Shandra, walk away from Sydney... now," Dakota ordered.

"Why?" I asked, "She's starting to look better."

"That is it, you're coming with me," Marks barked while whipping out a pair of black handcuffs.

"The priest is coming with me," Sydney screamed, "ALL OF YOU WILL DIE!"

Sydney grabbed me by the throat and tossed me to the side as she charged at everyone trying to help her mother. Two of the officers drew out their service weapons and opened fire. Dakota ducked away and charged past the demon and came to my side.

"Are you alright?" he asked. I nodded. I was sore, but the damage could easily have been worse. All my bone were still covered with skin. He carefully lifted me and hurried out of the house. I could tell by his heart rate, he was more concerned about me than anyone else in the room. He set me down near the barricade of cars outside of the house and kissed me on the forehead.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked me.

"Yeah, I'm okay. You've got to help them!" I told him.

"Not yet, they'll be able to hold off for a bit. I need you to do something while I try to contain the situation."

"What?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. He turned the screen towards me, squeezing the volume buttons to show the screensaver – a photo of us he edited to make it look like we stood as divine beings in front of a galaxy.

"I need you to call both Macys and Kristen. Try to convince them to come here as soon as possible. I have

all of their numbers saved in case something like this happened," he explained.

"I will. What are you going to do?" I asked.

He looked back at the house, where shouts and gunshots could be heard blowing around with screams and shatters. It sounded like a tornado was rushing through a zoo filled with hungry animals. A bit of fear appeared in his eyes just before he allowed his alter-egos to take over. I could hear several voices in his head debate whether to stay with me or to storm the house to attack the demon. The latter decision was favored as Dakota looked back into my eyes.

"I am going to stop this," he whispered. As he pulled away, I grabbed his wrist to get his attention just so I would have a chance to beg him to change his mind.

"Please, be careful," I cried. He leaned in for what seemed to be the longest kiss we ever shared. As his lips pulled away, I could hear the voices in his head trying to encourage him to respond, just so he didn't feel like he would lose me because of this battle. But, I was more afraid of losing him. This was a war. He may live, but the parts of him that I fell in love with could have died that day. His kiss felt like his way of saying that he would, but the three words he said after made me lose control of what little tears I was holding back.

He said, "I love you," for the first time since we started going out. After he said that, I lost it. Tears spilled down my face like a large waterfall as he ran back inside. '

"I love you too," I cried. I took a deep breath to try to calm down, but my efforts were pointless.

As I started to hear Dakota start shouting from inside the house, I hurried through his contacts and call everyone he said through a conference call. Immediately they all knew something was wrong and tried their best to get me to relax when they couldn't understand what I was saying.

Soon, I mustered up the air to say what they all needed to hear.

"Sydney... is... in trouble. Dakota... needs... help," I choked.

Everyone froze.

